

**“A MATTER OF MY HEART”:  
TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH INQUIRY-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

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A thesis submitted  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF EDUCATION**

in

**EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Faculty of Education  
University of Lethbridge  
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

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Date of Defence: March 16, 2023

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## **DEDICATION**

To my colleagues on this journey who inspire me by taking care of students each day -  
you have done good work, you are doing good work, you will do good work.

## ABSTRACT

Teacher participation in professional learning and growth activities varies for myriad reasons including, but not limited to, the efforts of educational leaders within schools and school system leaders more broadly. The purpose of this study was to gather insight into what reveals, or is essential to, the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth. Within the study, nine teachers from a mid-sized urban school division in Alberta, Canada were interviewed using a semi-structured interview process. Phenomenological processes were employed to design methodology and data analysis approaches that exposed the essence of participant experiences. Findings showed the relevance of relationships, identity, autonomy, resources, collaboration, and reflection, to the responses participants shared. This research study illuminates the lived experiences of participants for the purpose of generating essential understandings, while simultaneously avoiding judgment, interpretation, or criticism. Deriving that which is the essence of teachers' experiences was the primary objective of this study; however, recommendations are shared for both the purpose of future research and the professional reflection of educational leaders seeking insight on the role of inquiry in teacher professional learning and growth.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The support of family and friends (and colleagues who've become friends who are like family), has sustained both me and this project. Your unwavering care throughout the numerous obstacles, countless resets, and difficult moments, have meant a great deal to me. I will remember your uplifting words of encouragement, your grace whenever and wherever I needed it, and your patience with my process. I acknowledge the love and kindness this village has given in its efforts to raise me.

I would also like to acknowledge the unwavering mentorship of my thesis Co-Supervisors Dr. Pamela Adams and Dr. Carmen Mombourquette. Each of you has contributed to this journey in both separate and collective ways that are too numerous to count. I appreciate the fulfilling conversations, heartfelt advice, open honesty, and endless belief in my ability to persevere. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance and expertise of my thesis examination committee members. To Dr. Amy von Heyking and Dr. Dawn Burleigh, I express sincere appreciation and gratitude – thank you for the gifts of your time and talent.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and thank the participants of this research study. A career in education is simultaneously fulfilling and exhausting; your willingness to spend time with me outside of the workday was very generous. I appreciate your candour, openness, and sincerity with this process. Thank you for giving of yourself in order to enrich this research and to advance our collective learning.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Educational research is a field that is constantly growing and changing; it requires ongoing renewal in the same way that curriculum must be critically examined and updated. The requirement for continuous self-evaluation in education is not only evident in research, but in the daily reflection undertaken by education professionals as part of their ongoing growth and development. The Government of Alberta (2015), through the *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy*, requires that teachers in the province of Alberta are professionally obligated to participate in reflection on practice through creation of an annual plan for growth (colloquially, a Teacher Professional Growth Plan [TPGP]). It is commonly understood that teachers in the province create these annual plans, that the plans are reviewed and discussed with the school principal or designate, and that the teacher then enacts the plan (either during that school year, or as part of a multi-year process). The formal process of renewal of teachers' professional growth and learning therefore takes place annually through TPGP development, consultation, action, and reflection.

In Alberta's public school system, school leaders (principals, vice-principals, assistant principals) are also members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). Within this system, school-based leaders are primarily designated as colleagues to a school's teaching staff and are, therefore, also required to create TPGPs; these are commonly referred to as Principal Professional Growth Plans, or Leader Professional Growth Plans. The vast majority of professional educators within Alberta schools are responsible for creating plans for ongoing growth and improvement within their unique contexts and dependent upon their professional ambitions. Assisting this process are guiding documents such as the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018c), *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a),

*Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) and *Code of Professional Conduct* (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2018); each document lending credibility to the understanding that it is the legislated professional responsibility of educators in Alberta to engage with continuous learning and growth.

Provisions of the *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* state that teachers in Alberta are responsible for completing an annual professional growth plan that:

- “reflects goals and objectives based on an assessment of learning needs by the individual teacher,
- shows a demonstrable relationship to the teaching quality standard, and
- takes into consideration the education plans of the school, the school authority and the Government, or the program statement of an ECS operator” (Government of Alberta, 2015, Procedures section: Teacher Growth).

The policy also clearly outlines its aim “to ensure that each teacher’s actions, judgments and decisions are in the best educational interests of students and support optimum learning” (Government of Alberta, 2015, para. 1). Any annual growth plan developed by a teacher bound to this legislation must thereby: demonstrate a relationship to the *Teaching Quality Standard*; consider the education plans of other stakeholders; respond directly to the teachers’ own assessment of their goals, objectives, and learning needs; and, uphold optimum student learning.

The emphasis on Alberta teachers’ self-assessment of their own learning needs forms a backdrop to the aims of this current study. With individual teachers already possessing the legislated freedom (and responsibility) to determine their unique learning needs each year, several curiosities emerge regarding how teachers in Alberta pursue meeting their self-determined outcomes for professional learning and growth. All teachers in Alberta can learn and

grow; however, what are their experiences with learning and growth, and what can be learned writ large from those experiences? As Barth (2001) insisted, “[t]he question for the educator is not *whether* all humans can learn but what conditions we can devise so that they *will* learn. For only when the schoolhouse becomes a context for adult development will it become hospitable to student development” (p. 29). If Barth’s contentions are accurate, there are important reasons for exploring teacher professional learning in Alberta and its connections to professional growth planning.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Professional growth and development are expectations for teachers in Alberta. There is an obligation that educators in this province uphold certain criteria of professional standards, and ongoing reflection on practice by engaging in growth opportunities is expected. Teachers in Alberta will most likely experience school-based professional learning, access opportunities from regional consortia, attend in-servicing from their school division, or join professional learning groups hosted by their professional organization, the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA). In Alberta, it is an ongoing expectation that all members of the ATA complete an annual plan (or update a multi-year plan) for their professional learning and growth. This plan is then shared with the principal or members of the school-based leadership team (principals, vice-principals, assistant principals), and revisited throughout the school year. The expectations of professional learning and growth for teachers in Alberta, as prescribed by several guiding documents, policies, and protocols (Alberta Education 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2018; Government of Alberta, 2015), raise several questions that motivate this research. This study seeks to understand the experiences of practicing teachers in a mid-sized school division in southern Alberta who engage in professional learning and growth. This

research is of importance to many education stakeholders, but perhaps most importantly to school leaders who work directly to support teachers with their professional learning plans each year.

School leaders take on many roles to support the professional learning needs of teachers, from explicitly mandating collaboration to simply being present and listening to teachers' ideas and concerns. The professional learning relationship between school leaders and teachers is a vital one. As Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) explained it, "in more successful organizations, collaboration is the means by which strong relationships are given greater purpose. Through collaboration," the authors insisted, "educators build trust and mutual respect" (p. 31). By way of their research and fieldwork on school leadership and educational learning communities, Adams et al. (2019) discovered that not all communities are created equally, but that *generative communities* are "those that consistently undertake actions that demonstrate enthusiastic commitment, mutual respect, and appreciation of inquiry" (p. 37). Evidently, there are important interconnections between educational approaches to inquiry, collaboration, school culture, learning communities, and trusting relationships within a professional learning environment. According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014), "[a]s teachers engage in the process of inquiry, their thinking and reflection are made public for discussion, sharing, debate, and purposeful educative conversation" (p. 23). The authors posited that teacher inquiry is both intentional and visible, and that through inquiry "teaching becomes less isolated and overwhelming" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 23).

Of course, professional learning through inquiry is not reserved solely for teachers, and the health of a school learning community does not rest solely on the shoulders of school-based leaders. In Alberta, school leadership teams are comprised of teachers who also benefit from

engagement in ongoing support, guidance, and generative community-building. Adams et al. (2019) explained that “strong district leadership teams are able to help foster the growth of strong school leadership teams” (p. 31). The authors then described that “norms of distributed leadership will take root in the culture of those schools, and more numerous and **effective teams** of teachers will be able to take on an increasingly shared responsibility for the leadership of learning” (emphasis in original) (Adams et al., 2019, p. 31). School divisions, and in turn schools, that model a commitment to leading learning through community-building, mutual respect, collaborative inquiry, and reflection on practice, grow stronger and more effective in sustaining their goals of improved student learning. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) clarified that “[t]hrough the inquiry process, teachers can support with evidence the decisions they make as educators and, subsequently, advocate for particular children,” and that “[i]nquiry ultimately emerges as action and results in change” (p. 27). It could be understood that inquiry-based professional learning has the ability to lead toward powerful change for schools. Dana (2009) explained that through inquiry, “the principal develops a sense of ownership in the knowledge constructed, and this sense of ownership heavily contributes to the possibilities for real change in schools” (p. 10).

Important to this current research was an understanding of teachers’ unique experiences with using inquiry methods as an approach to their professional learning. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) insisted that “[r]egardless of your method of inquiry, the subject of your inquiry, or the context of your inquiry, what is most important is that you do inquire” (p. 26). Although inquiry, collaboration, and learning communities will look different in unique contexts, the act of initial engagement in these processes—taking the first step—seems to be of greater importance. Adams et al. (2019) wrote that “in establishing the conditions of a generative learning

community, [...] leaders set the stage by finding the context-perfect balance between tension and support” (p. 43). When school leaders commit to the process of inquiry, as both a generative leader and a participant, they move toward improvement in school culture, student learning, and professional growth for the learning community. As Dana (2009) argued, “[b]y cultivating [an] inquiry stance toward practice, principals and teachers play a critical role in enhancing their own professional growth and ultimately the experience of schooling for children” (p. 11).

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to better understand teachers’ personal lived experiences as they have undertaken inquiry-based professional learning and growth. This research engaged a sample population of teaching professionals in sharing their understanding of inquiry-based professional learning, growth, and development, as well as the ways in which they did (or did not) practice inquiry. Creating a space for teachers to share their personal lived experiences with professional growth planning—and questioning teachers about their use of inquiry-based methods for learning—illustrated in what ways, if at all, inquiry informed their practice. The outcome of this research is salient for school-based leaders seeking to support practicing teachers in their schools, systems leaders in division office, and other researchers concerned with the experiences of teachers engaging with inquiry-based professional learning. In addition, this research could also inform professional organizations such as the Alberta Teachers’ Association (through its Professional Development branch and its teacher support programs), or the vast network of regional consortia responsible for professional learning distribution across the province. The primary question explored by this study was:

What is the role of inquiry in teachers’ experiences of professional learning and growth?

### **Rationale and Significance**

Embedded within the education system in Alberta is the expectation that teachers engage



in ongoing professional learning and development throughout their career. It is reasonably assumed that the degree to which teachers engage in meaningful professional learning has at least some positive influence on student learning; this outcome—student learning—being the goal of public education. With the *Ministerial Order on Student Learning* (Alberta, 2013), an expectation was established that:

...the fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing the competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society. (para 1)

Harkening back to Barth (2001), then, it is understood that when the goal of the education system is student growth and development, school leaders must also critically examine practices that allow for developing the full potential of teacher growth and learning. Examining teachers' experiences with using inquiry in professional learning activities, this study was timely in its focus on teachers as the principal agent of control over their unique learning contexts. Despite global education reform efforts that focus on teacher accountability through external measures, this study was designed to use an approach that considers the phenomenon of inquiry-based professional learning, as described by the teacher participants, to illuminate the essences of their own personal experiences. Professional learning, growth, and development is incumbent upon the professional educator in Alberta, and many factors influence this reality. It is not uncommon for shifting priorities in education to be influenced by a changing society or shifting reforms.

### **Positioning the Problem**

During times of social and political change, conditions and parameters of public sector services will undoubtedly face the direct scrutiny of the public eye, changing governments, and

global reform initiatives; education is susceptible to such scrutiny. Despite external pressures, challenges facing school leaders in Alberta also come from more local sources. In a recent publication, The Alberta Teachers' Association (2019a) asked Alberta school leaders the question: "What constraints do you experience as a school leader, if any, that make you unable to take appropriate action or do what you know to be right?" (p. 13). Top responses to the question included funding, complex classrooms, and parents; although, the greatest response was division expectations which included policy requirements, funding and resources, priorities, and professional autonomy (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019a, p. 13). Teachers and school leaders in Alberta face many complex decisions each day, not the least of which is planning for engaging and meaningful learning experiences for young people.

Another recent publication from the Alberta Teachers' Association (2019b) focused on the use of action research by Alberta teachers through personal inquiry and school- or division-based team collaboration. The guidebook insisted that "[c]ollaborative action research is an effective tool from curriculum implementation, problem solving, school improvement and developing a culture of teamwork and continuous improvement" (p. 35). Despite rising challenges faced by teachers and school leaders in the province, inquiry in professional growth and learning might provide great opportunity for improved student learning outcomes alongside teacher and school-leader autonomy. Since the purpose of this study was to better understand teachers' personal lived experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth, the problem for a school-based educational leader is one of determining how teachers experience these phenomena, and in turn, how to best support teachers.

Professional learning, growth, and development are core aspects of the ongoing teacher-centric reforms that can be essential to building a strong school culture focused on student

learning. As Dana, Yendol-Hoppey, and Snow-Gerono (2006) explained, “[i]f educators themselves should own the inquiry questions, the responsibility to broader demands of education policy and contexts must be deliberated upon in order to maintain the integrity of initial inquiry questions” (p. 68). Due to educational reform initiatives and increasing pressures on the education system, it may become increasingly important that teachers can: access their own skills of inquiry-based growth planning; develop collaborative inquiry methods and processes within local schools and systems; and build or maintain current peer-to-peer professional learning networks that sustain ongoing inquiry. As Campbell (2017) summarized it, “[c]onnecting to the larger question of Canadian education in a world of educational improvement, we have persisting and emerging inequities to identify, understand, and address” (p. 22). While researching with the aim of better understanding teachers’ personal lived experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth, an examination of my current context in the world of education is appropriate and necessary.

## **Context**

My current position is that of a vice-principal in a mid-sized Alberta high school. The school in which I work has a student population of approximately 930, with just over 40 teachers and a total staff approaching 80. As set out by the expectations of the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), a school leader “nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning” (p. 5). The standard further explained that school leaders “[create] meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 5). My school leadership team (consisting of myself, two other vice-principals, and one principal) guided professional learning for teaching staff on the topics of inquiry-based professional learning, crafting an effective inquiry question, and the

purposes of generative dialogue to sustaining inquiry throughout the school year. Within the school, I support specific groups of teachers and staff; although the administrative team works collaboratively, targeted supports are provided by each school leader to a group of staff. In my context, our school leadership team “engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to identify opportunities for improving leadership, teaching, and learning” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4), on a school-wide level, in smaller department groups, and person-to-person. To begin with, professional learning to create meaningful, sustainable inquiry questions took place in late August 2019 before students returned to school. The generative dialogue component of discussing inquiry questions for professional growth was progressive and steady among the teachers and school leaders that school year. It seemed generally well-liked, and the learning community planned to retain the process and work toward improving practice in the subsequent school years.

Prior to beginning the generative dialogue conversations with our own teaching staff, the division-wide leadership committee in our school division began work with local university researchers to build our own capacity in this area. Coordinated by the superintendent of the school division, the efforts to educate our division school leaders took place during administrator professional learning opportunities scheduled accordingly over the two years prior. Generally, the interactive sessions provided by the university researchers were hosted during embedded professional learning at administrator committee meetings during the school day. These learning sessions also took place during ‘retreat’ (informal, conference-style) events hosted off-site, serving both professional learning and team-building functions. The university researchers had engaged in academic/theoretical/research-based explication of the generative dialogue, practical

case study analysis/*in situ* demonstration, and side-by-side coaching with the process of leading generative dialogue with colleagues.

As a current Master of Education (Educational Leadership) candidate, for the past many years I have been engaged in graduate level coursework, study, and dialogue centred on leadership development. I have completed two leadership internships within the school setting. The first internship experience (Fall 2017) was crafted around encouraging teachers to incorporate critical thinking skills within their teaching practice. This work precipitated from my curiosity regarding the Alberta Education student learning competencies (Alberta Education, 2016a), specifically the component of critical thinking. I was also motivated by the curriculum redesign process undertaken by Alberta Education at the time and its shift toward a concept-based curriculum (Alberta Education, 2016b). I was curious about how assisting teachers with developing critical thinking skills in their students would also support teachers in developing their preparedness for a new curriculum that would emphasize critical thinking aspects through conceptual understanding. My goal was that a group of connected colleagues would grow to understand what Alberta Education and our school division expected from the integration of critical thinking competencies and the development of innovative mindsets in students.

My second internship experience (Fall 2018) brought me into a more direct, one-to-one leadership relationship with colleagues in my school. Throughout my first internship, I was focused on leading professional learning for teachers and support staff; since then, my growth in the area of generative dialogue techniques (Adams, Mombourquette, & Townsend, 2019; see also Adams & Townsend, 2014; Townsend & Adams, 2009) allowed me to support teachers in developing and implementing inquiry-based professional learning plans. Although not all teachers within my school fully engaged in generative dialogue, each one did craft an inquiry

question to help guide their work throughout that school year. My initial offer to engage in generative dialogue was sent to all teachers under my leadership “portfolio” and, from that offer, I received interest from five teachers. Beyond the five teachers I met with on a regular basis, three others approached me with requests to support them in crafting their inquiry questions, drafting strategies, and determining indicators of success. Townsend and Adams (2009) insisted that “[t]rust is at the centre of effective collaboration and trust, like mutual respect, can be learned and earned through working together on meaningful activities that offer participants the chance to grow, to achieve, and to be more useful to others” (p. 53). All teachers volunteered at least once to participate in a “triad” formation (inquirer, questioner, recorder) to provide direct collegial feedback and experience with generative dialogue. This collaborative time was well-received, and as an administrator I heard a lot of positive feedback when we facilitated this opportunity for staff. The ongoing work of collegial generative dialogue took place with regularity and frequency throughout my second internship.

### **Common Understandings, Key Terms, and Definitions**

Throughout this study, several key terms are used consistently, and with fidelity to a particular frame of reference. The four most frequently used terms were inquiry, collaborative inquiry, professional development, and professional learning. Notwithstanding specific definitions, there are important beliefs about teacher growth and learning that require clarification. In the contemporary education vernacular, the terms *professional development* and *professional learning* seem to be used interchangeably. According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014), the traditional forms of professional development are “typically focused on the knowledge of an outside ‘expert’ being shared with a group of teachers” (p. 13). Although educational leaders may believe this to be “an efficient method of disseminating information,” it

“often does not result in real and meaningful change in the classroom” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 13). In this context, professional development is sometimes described as sit and get, one and done, and something that is done to a teacher as opposed to something a teacher does themselves. Townsend and Adams (2009) described learning as a process through which a “commitment to continuous learning by all members is synonymous with *becoming* rather than *arriving*” and that “the development of a learning community [is] a journey rather than a destination” (p. 38). There continues to be a place for professional development in education, but an increasing shift has been toward practices considered to be representative of professional learning.

Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) described a time, not too long ago, when “the vocabulary of professional development was starting to be seen as too limiting or as not attending to research around adult learning and human growth” (p. 128). There are key differences between the traditional conception of professional development, and what has emerged in recent decades in relation to professional learning. According to Adams et. al (2019), “[t]he concept of [professional development] was grounded in a training model made popular all the way back in the Industrial Revolution” (p. 130), whereas professional learning incorporates several other elements including a focus on reflective practice. Table 1 is helpful in further distinguishing between the two concepts as it contains descriptive characteristics aligning to professional development (PD) and professional learning (PL) within the context of education (Adams et al. 2019, p. 129):

Table 1

*Characteristic Differences Between Professional Development and Professional Learning*

Professional Development	Professional Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Episodic</li> <li>• Didactic</li> <li>• Industrial</li> <li>• Accountability-Focused</li> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Depersonalized</li> <li>• Decontextualized</li> <li>• Off-Site</li> <li>• Privatized</li> <li>• Product Based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cyclical</li> <li>• Exploratory</li> <li>• Differentiated</li> <li>• Responsibility-Focused</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Individualized</li> <li>• Context Dependent</li> <li>• Site Embedded</li> <li>• Shared</li> </ul>

Professional development, and the more general context in which it is described here, is not inherently negative or without value for education professionals; however, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the significant shift toward professional learning as a focus in Alberta. Within the recently adopted (September 1, 2019) Alberta quality standard documents (Alberta Education 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), there is no mention of ‘professional development’ whatsoever. The word ‘development’ is mentioned twice in the *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) and only twice in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a). All uses of the word ‘development’ refer to student development exclusively. There is a reliance on the language of professional learning to describe activities that teachers in Alberta undertake in their growth planning. Additionally, a focus on the language of learning in general appears to be favoured by Alberta Education. Table 2 clarifies the frequency of language of learning mentioned within these documents from Alberta Education:



Table 2

*Language Used in Alberta Education Quality Standard Documents*

	Professional Learning	Professional growth	Learning
<i>Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard</i> (Alberta Education, 2018b)	3 mentions	0 mentions	22 mentions
<i>Leadership Quality Standard</i> (Alberta Education, 2018a)	2 mentions	2 mentions	28 mentions
<i>Teaching Quality Standard</i> (Alberta Education, 2018c)	1 mention	1 mention	35 mentions

This text analysis in Table 2 is for illustrative purposes only, but the use of language is interesting and noteworthy.

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) argued that “inquiring professionals seek out change by reflecting on their practice” (p. 12), so it comes as no surprise that within their research, the process of reflection through *inquiry* is highly emphasized. The authors went on to describe how teachers practice inquiry by “posing questions or “wonderings,” collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understanding developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 12). Townsend and Adams (2009) described that “[e]ffective collaborative inquiry is most likely to occur when teams form relationships based on trust and interdependence, and when participants bring with them effective communication skills and a common language for conversations” (p. 43). DeLuca et al. (2015) wrote that collaborative inquiry is generally “viewed as a learning structure that not only provokes inquiry into teaching effectiveness but also supports the development of cultures of inquiry within and across educator

groups” (p. 655).

In another way, Dana (2009), used the term ‘inquiry’ quite broadly to include aspects of action research, practitioner research, classroom research, and practitioner inquiry, all the while emphasizing the relatedness of these processes “to represent administrators’ and teachers’ systematic study of their own practice” (p. 6). Within this study, the process of inquiry will be described in both collaborative and individual contexts, but always as teacher-centered and with the understanding that “teacher inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and reform” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 12) in education, and that collaborative inquiries “often focus on developing teacher pedagogy and practice with the ultimate aim of improving educational outcomes for students” (DeLuca et al., 2015, p. 640). The following key terms, and the general definitions provided, were used within an educational frame of reference throughout this study.

**Inquiry.** Inquiry is an ongoing process undertaken by a reflective practitioner (teacher, school leader, support staff member) whose primary objective is the investigation of a guiding question upon which the inquiry is focused; usually this is the inquirers’ own practice. Jacobs, Yendol-Hoppey, and Dana (2015) wrote that “[p]ractitioner inquiry is defined as systematic and intentional study of an educator’s own professional practice” (p. 375), and further explained that “[w]hen teachers engage in inquiry they have the opportunity to generate knowledge ‘of’ practice as they work together to analyze, critique, and understand practices and beliefs” (p. 376).

**Collaborative inquiry.** The process whereby two or more individuals commit to a collective process of engagement focused on a central guiding inquiry question or common focus for investigation. According to Townsend and Adams (2009), “[t]he collaborative inquiry process begins when a group of educators commits to exploring and answering a compelling

question about a chosen element of professional practice, followed by a cycle of examination, experimentation, exploration, and public reflection” (p. 43). Additionally, Donohoo and Katz (2017) wrote that “[c]ollaborative teacher inquiry...involves identifying an evidence-based student learning need that is framed in progress and achievement,” and that it involves “teachers working together to tackle challenges of professional practice by questioning what they already know and do in an area of demonstrated student learning need” (p. 25).

**Professional development.** Events, activities, or experiences designed to deliver or share information with a selected audience for a specific pre-determined outcome, or to meet a targeted learning objective. As Joyce and Calhoun (2010) described it, “[p]rofessional development comes into being through deliberate actions by the organization—usually the district or school, sometimes the state or province—to generate learning by educators” (p. 9). The authors went on to say that “the most common forms of professional development do not have clear evidence of the student learning that will come from them” (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010, p. 9).

**Professional learning.** Activities, experiences, or systems and processes implemented with consideration to the uniqueness of adult learning contexts, while acknowledging that learning is ongoing, embedded in teaching practice, and everchanging in the face of new understanding and knowledge. According to Sparks (2009), “[n]ew habits of mind and practice require robust forms of professional learning” (p. 48), and “the school context and the professional learning processes used in schools have more influence on day-to-day practice than research and professional literature” (p. 50).

The purpose of this study was to better understand teachers’ personal lived experiences as they have undertaken inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Using a phenomenological approach to the development of this research study, nine practicing teachers with different levels

of professional experience described phenomena related to their own inquiry learning as educators in the province of Alberta. To adequately prepare for this work, it was important to understand the research around adult learning, professional learning, and collaborative inquiry in education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Seeking to understand teachers' personal lived experiences with inquiry-based professional learning practices served as the foundation for this current study. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) insisted that "teaching is full of enormous complexities, paradoxes, and tensions, and hence, teaching itself invites inquiry" (p. 23). For that reason, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the salient research related to adult education, adult learning, inquiry learning, collaborative inquiry, and types of teacher professional learning. In addition to establishing a broad understanding of the research that supports this study, the literature review illustrates the complexity of the relationship between teaching and learning. As it relates to school leadership and school culture, this chapter also provides some understanding as to why Cherkowski (2018) asserted that "in flourishing schools relationships are central and at the core of all the work and all the learning that happens" (p. 66). Cherkowski (2018) continued by saying:

In flourishing schools educators make the time and the space to collaborate in meaningful ways; they work hard to maintain caring relationships that encourage each other and model for their students an ongoing attention to compassionately supporting risk-taking, failing and then persevering in their ongoing efforts to continuously improve their teaching and learning. (p. 66)

The following chapter examines the interrelated contexts of teaching and learning, against the backdrop of teacher professional growth and inquiry-based practices already being used today.

### **Adult Education & The Nature of Adult Learning**

Adult learners are not simply larger versions of grade school students; the nature of adult learning and adult education necessitates a unique approach. Notwithstanding individual learning profiles, adult learners in general have different learning needs when compared to younger

students. Factors like motivation, engagement, readiness, and purpose for learning must all be reconsidered when approaching adult education. Adult learners bring diverse experiences from life, and wide-ranging past personal experiences with learning, which necessitate a unique approach.

**Andragogy and adult learning.** To fully understand and investigate what makes learning unique for adults, educational leaders must first begin to understand those adult learners. In addition to seeking answers as to what makes adult learners unique, leaders may consider how adult learners learn best. Present understanding of pedagogy is rooted in centuries of trial, error, and reflection on teaching and learning, but ultimately pedagogy is very much a teacher-directed pursuit that places primary decision-making power with the teacher (Knowles, 1990). The twentieth-century American academic theorist, researcher, and author, Malcolm Knowles, is the seminal author about adult learning and education, including the concept of andragogy. Drawing from several of Knowles' significant contributions to this field establishes a foundation of understanding within this literature review. Knowles (1980) wrote that models of andragogy and pedagogy, as guides to education, are "probably most useful when seen not as dichotomous but rather as two ends of a spectrum" (p. 43). Leong (2018) asserted that "it is more correct to say that andragogy arose from a clash with pedagogy, not as a derivation from pedagogy" (p. 10). Pedagogy and andragogy are related; not opposites and not in contrast, but rather existing on a continuum related to the composition, experience, and needs of the learners being supported in education.

With respect to the unique needs of adult learners, efforts must be made to create an atmosphere conducive to their specific positionality within the learning environment. According to Knowles (1990), "adults learn best in informal, comfortable, flexible, nonthreatening settings"

(p. 54). Both the physical and psychological learning environments adults occupy should be comfortable, safe, and respectful of their needs (Knowles, 1980). Knowles (1980) described a positive adult learning atmosphere as one “in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers” and that “teachers convey in many ways whether their attitude is one of interest in and respect for the students” (p. 47). Every effort should be made to set the tone for welcoming, safe dialogue, and encouraging risk-taking without fear of reprisal; because of course, “the physical environment” of the learning climate “should be one in which adults feel at ease” (Knowles, 1980, p. 46). Townsend and Adams (2009) reinforced this understanding through their observation that “a climate of safety and support encourages movement from congenial discussion toward authentic discourse” (p. 43). Establishing the secure and accepting atmosphere necessary for educators to be vulnerable and take risks remains of prime importance for authentic learning to take place.

Both Knowles (1990) and Loeng (2018) agreed that theories of andragogy had been developing in Europe for some time before the concept began to grow in North America in the mid-20th century. Loeng (2018) also argued that, for many decades in North America, the commonly held understanding of andragogy posited by Knowles may have been restricted due to limitations on linguistic translation. In fact, Loeng (2018) described how conceptual understanding of andragogy had been developing in Europe since the early 1800s, but a lack of linguistic translation of academic works limited Knowles’s exposure to these theories. Despite this, Loeng (2018) affirmed that “from a contemporary perspective, Knowles’s andragogy is the one that has been widely accepted” (p. 11). According to Knowles (1980), “andragogy is simply another model of assumptions about learners to be used alongside the pedagogical model of assumptions, thereby providing two alternative models for testing out the assumptions as to their

“fit” with particular situations” (p. 43). Andragogy is the theory of adult learning that encompasses understanding of the distinctive attributes of adult learners (Knowles, 1990). Knowles (1990) described the following unique characteristics as The Andragogical Model, which includes:

- The need to know,
- The learners’ self-concept,
- The role of the learners’ experience,
- Readiness to learn,
- Orientation to learning, and
- Motivation.

Adult learners are unique in their needs; therefore, an awareness of andragogy is important to any attempts to plan for meeting adult learning needs within an educational setting. As educational leaders become better capable of discerning the needs of their colleagues and staff, their ability to respond effectively to these requirements increases.

**Inquiry-learning in adult education and teacher preparation programs.** The process of inquiry is a tool that can be employed in support of adult learning. Particularly relevant here is the awareness that inquiry-based learning is an effective way to support teachers as they become deeply engaged researchers who undertake the work required to evaluate and change their teaching practice. Researchers have been investigating the relevance of using inquiry-based practices to support reflection, learning, and growth in pre-service teacher preparation programs (Yendol-Hoppey, Dana, & Delane, 2009; Dana, Yendol-Hoppey, & Snow-Gerono, 2006; Dana & Silva, 2000). Dana and Silva (2000) discussed the importance of pre-service teachers’ engagement in different inquiry processes during a year-long internship; shared inquiry, parallel



inquiry, and inquiry support are used “with prospective teachers to inquire about teaching and learning” (p. 9). Inquiry is a powerful tool for developing the acumen of both pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and teacher educators, as well as for strengthening the relationships between stakeholders in teacher preparation programs. As it relates to the enhancement of collective teacher efficacy, Donohoo and Katz (2017) insisted that collaborative teacher inquiry “includes two components: collaboration (working together) and inquiry (examining teacher and student learning in search of deep understanding and evidence of impact)” (p. 24). According to Dana and Silva (2000), “supervision within inquiry” (p. 13) is a strong form of teacher support, and progressing toward this form of supervision will “open the doors for teacher inquiry, a teacher-driven form of professional growth” (p. 13). As Knowles (1990) described it, “while adults are responsive to some external motivators..., the most potent motivators are internal pressures” (p. 63). It rests that teacher-driven professional growth in the form of inquiry also satisfies the motivation required by adult learners in order to sustain growth over time.

Following their work with pre-service teachers in the Professional Development School, Dana and Silva (2000) described a four-phase progression of supervision through year-long teacher internships: readiness, traditional supervision, reflective supervision, and supervision with inquiry. According to the researchers, the fourth phase occurs as collaborative action research wherein “supervision becomes located within the mentor and intern’s teacher inquiry project” as stakeholder partners “collaboratively focus their attention on a question of interest to the intern and classroom teacher” (Dana & Silva, 2000, p. 24). Moving pre-service teachers toward an inquiry mindset speaks to Knowles’s (1990) insistence that readiness to learn, and orientation to learning, are both key aspects of andragogy. Knowles (1990) described readiness to learn as preparing for the “developmental tasks associated with moving from one

developmental stage to the next” (p. 60). Additionally, Knowles (1990) explained orientation to learning by stating that “adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront” (p. 61). Adult learners (pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and supervising teachers) are engaged in effective andragogy when they move along a readiness to learn spectrum with a strong orientation to learning. According to Adams (2016), “[e]ngagement in collaborative inquiry during practicum can contribute to a portrait of pre-service teachers who are immersed in bridging the theory-practice gap and who have developed the understanding that a career in teaching is defined, in a major way, by their commitment to continuous exploration and learning” (p. 32). Dana and Silva (2000) insisted that “meaningful teacher inquiry should not depart from the daily work of teachers, but become part of their everyday classroom activities” (p. 26), which speaks to Knowles’s orientation to learning. Similarly, Dana and Silva (2000) suggested that “by building skills and an inquiry stance toward teaching” results in “life-long learners offering opportunities for reform minded teaching to thrive” (p. 25), which harkens back to Knowles’s readiness to learn.

Adult education, and its ties to providing support for pre-service teachers, is important for education stakeholders and school leaders to attend to. The work of Jacobs, Yendol-Hoppey, and Dana (2015) emphasized the importance of inquiry (in this case, practitioner inquiry) to the development of teacher educators in doctoral programs serving pre-service teachers. They discovered that inquiry processes aided doctoral students in being focused on supporting pre-service teachers in their education programs, identifying the value of community for inquiry and addressing program innovation, and engaging in high-quality professional learning through inquiry (Jacobs, Yendol-Hoppey, & Dana, 2015). Seeking to identify common threads among

teacher research questions, Dana, Yendol-Hoppey, and Snow-Gerono (2006) investigated materials developed for teachers about conducting teacher research and considered it alongside research published through their own professional development school context. The researchers demonstrated that “engagement in teacher research by veteran and prospective teachers alike has led to the development of an inquiry stance, the ultimate goal of the completion of teacher research projects” (Dana, Yendol-Hoppey, & Snow-Gerono, 2006, pp. 59-60). Investigating the connections between collaboration, inquiry, and inquiry-oriented mentorship between practicing teachers and pre-service teachers, Yendol-Hoppey, Dana, and Delane (2009) described “how the tensions and dilemmas associated with the complexity of mentoring can be unearthed, explored, and resolved through the inquiry process” (p. 12). Stakeholders and researchers in the world of education, including teacher preparation programs, understand the value of inquiry to the process of adult learning. Developing inquiring teachers, teacher leaders, and teachers as researchers, is assisted through employing techniques of inquiry and inquiry-oriented practice.

**Adult education and connections to collaborative inquiry for learning.** Following extensive studies focusing on collaborative inquiry as tools for coordinating professional learning and developing school leadership, Adams and Townsend (2014) brought forward a synthesis of their findings. According to the researchers, participants in their studies identified six general characteristics related to collaborative inquiry and growth:

- Sustained rather than episodic...;
- Shared responsibility rather than external accountability...;
- Here rather than there...;
- Differentiated rather than mass-produced...;
- Inquiry-based rather than didactic...; and,

- Shared rather than private.... (Adams & Townsend, 2014, para. 23-28)

Collaborative inquiry can be used as a strong skill for professional learning and growth in teachers and teacher leaders. Participants in inquiry-based models must be adequately supported and prepared to undertake the tasks.

A key aspect of adult learning is to first hold a self-concept that is ready and open to taking an ownership stake in learning (Knowles, 1990). Adams and Townsend (2014) described collaborative inquiry as best when it is sustained over time, thereby allowing “educators to concentrate on critical areas of exploration long enough to incorporate into practice essential instructional skills” (para. 22). For this sustained inquiry to be effective, practitioners benefit when they are familiar with Knowles’ (1990) view of a learners’ self-concept: adult learners “resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them” (p. 58). Accepting that adult learners (pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, teacher leaders, school leaders, etc.) seek a positive orientation toward self-concept and learning, “adult educators have been working at creating learning experiences in which adults are helped to make the transition from dependent to self-directing learners” (Knowles, 1990, p. 59). One-off, single episode, “sit and get” professional development is rarely sustained over time, and most certainly inconsistent. Adult learners participating in this type of learning often feel it is something “done to” them, as opposed to something over which they have ownership or agency. Holding an awareness of the adult learners’ self-concept and orientation toward learning increases the likelihood of success with sustained collaborative inquiry.

On the subject of learner readiness, Knowles’s (1990) description of andragogy paid attention to the moment when “adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations” (p. 60). Adult learners

demonstrate readiness to learn by making choices that indicate their achievement of appropriate developmental tasks (Knowles, 1990). As Adams and Townsend (2014) emphasized, meaningful professional learning occurs through collaborative inquiry with a focus on shared responsibility for the outcome - voluntary participation being emphasized over mandated compliance. The relationship can be complex when assessing mandated compliance with collaborative inquiry versus an actual willing participation in the process. Segedin (2011) found that it was “unclear if teacher accountability led to teacher empowerment, if teacher empowerment led to teacher accountability or if the position of teacher accountability and teacher empowerment is continuously oscillating” (p. 54). According to Adams and Townsend (2014), when professional learning takes place with an understanding of shared responsibility, “participants assumed greater ownership of the direction and results of their efforts” (para. 23). To improve the likelihood of successful outcomes, school leaders supporting staff in sustained collaborative inquiry efforts will pair an understanding of their adult learners’ developmental readiness to learn, with a strong investment in shared responsibility and avoidance of relying upon external accountability measures (Adams & Townsend, 2014).

For inquiry to be meaningful, useful, and relevant, it should find itself grounded in reality and everyday teaching practice. Adams and Townsend (2014) reported that “when collaborative inquiry was site-embedded, matters of context were more fully attended to and, accordingly, professional learning was more likely to be integrated into classroom practice” (para. 25). The researchers described this as learning taking place “here rather than there” (Adams and Townsend, 2014), which connects strongly to Knowles (1990) and his model for andragogy that includes orientation to learning. According to Knowles (1990), “adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or

deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (p. 61). When the “here and now” of collaborative inquiry is combined with a strong orientation to learning, a relevance emerges that is critically linked to professional practice that is site-embedded and strongly impactful.

In addition to being learner-centred, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in practice, strong adult learning considers the role of learners’ experiences (Knowles, 1990). In Knowles’s (1990) conception of andragogy, adult learners bring with them vast life experiences which makes group composition more heterogeneous, therefore necessitating “greater emphasis...on experiential techniques” and what he describes as “peer-helping activities” (p. 59). Respect for the prior learning of teacher colleagues and placing value on the knowledge of personal lived experiences for peers lays a strong foundation for collaboration. As it relates to collaborative inquiry, Adams and Townsend (2014) emphasized the importance of shared experiences, rejecting notions of isolation and solitariness in professional learning. Through their research, Adams and Townsend (2014) affirmed that “educators in these studies engaged in and shared professional learning in diverse, yet collaborative ways” (para. 28); insisting that “mass-offered PD opportunities tend to intensify norms of isolation and privatism among educators” (para. 28). Valuing the role of learners’ past experiences, and offering shared space through collaboration, using experiential techniques, peer-supported research, and rejecting notions of solitary professional learning, strengthens the value of inquiry between and among colleagues.

The remaining two components of collaborative inquiry described by Adams and Townsend (2014) are that it be grounded with inquiry (not didactic) and differentiated to the inquirer (not mass-produced). The ability to differentiate professional learning is a benefit for teachers and teacher leaders who seek to meet the needs of diverse colleagues, whereas traditional professional development seeks to streamline and homogenize learning opportunities

(Adams and Townsend, 2014). According to Knowles (1990), an important aspect of the andragogical model is that “adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it” (p. 57); in the case of collaborative inquiry, adult learners will of course choose what and why they hope to learn before even starting the process. It will be the job of a learning facilitator to “make an intellectual case for the value of the learning in improving the effectiveness of the learners’ performance or the quality of their lives” (Knowles, 1990, p. 58) by supporting that learner to identify what they need or want to know; the process of support and guidance is toward differentiation and personalization of the learning. Similarly, as Adams and Townsend (2014) insisted, the collaborative inquiry models they studied “incorporated differentiated and personalized approaches in which small teams of educators concentrated their professional learning on those aspects of practice unique to their contexts and challenges” (para. 26). Differentiating collaborative inquiry can become increasingly powerful when done from the perspective of what an adult learner identifies as their own prioritized need to know.

The final characteristic of collaborative inquiry made clear by Adams and Townsend (2014) is that it be free of ulterior motives and remain truly focused on an inquiry-based model. The researchers found that “collaborative inquiry is predicated on an organic, curiosity-based curriculum evolving from the pressing questions to which educators in these studies were most immediately seeking answers” (Adams & Townsend, 2014, para. 27). The internal motivation toward inquiry was directed by curiosity and the search for answers to immediately relevant questions. According to Knowles (1990), motivation is a vital component to the andragogical model. Knowles (1990) wrote that “while adults are responsive to some external motivators..., the most potent motivators are internal pressures” (p. 63). Considering this, the importance of autonomy and self-direction over the inquiry process cannot be overstated. There is a role for

school leaders and teacher leaders facilitating collaborative inquiry to guide the process, but it remains important that inquirers are the drivers of their own inquiry. Developing professionally relevant, and personally important, inquiry questions is the job of the inquirer; and as Knowles (1990) as well as Adams and Townsend (2014) attested, the internal motivation of curiosity-based inquiry is paramount for the work to be sustained.

### **Importance of Teacher-Directed Professional Learning**

Adult learners benefit from having autonomy within the process of the learning and educators are no different when it comes to the considerations of teacher-directed professional learning. When presenting teachers with a foundation of presumed competence, choice, and ownership over their own learning, school leaders build a foundation of trust with their colleagues. Feelings of intrinsic motivation, responsibility to the outcomes of their learning, and investment in the learning process, can lead to improved results for teachers engaged in directing their own learning. Professional learning, despite being focused on professional outcomes, is also a social process and school leaders must not discount the ways in which this learning can serve to be personally fulfilling for educators, too.

**Professional learning communities (PLCs).** The concept of collaboration as a strong tool for developing and achieving common goals is not new; however, application of collaborative practices to educational improvement, reform, and teacher professional learning is a research area only a few decades old. According to Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002), the conceptualization of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be distilled into three essential practices: “(1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous



improvement” (p. 3). Put simply, PLCs focus the work of educators toward seeking common foundations, shared goals, and continuous evidence-based improvement. Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) succinctly stated that “the driving engine of the collaborative culture of a PLC is the team” (p. 5), and they described that “individual teachers give up a degree of personal autonomy in exchange for collective authority to answer the most critical questions of teaching and learning” (p. 5). The PLC model works, through efforts of collaboration and common ideals within the whole school community, to achieve shared objectives focused on critical issues in education, leading change, and enhancing student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas, 2006).

Not all teacher collaborative efforts are functional or consistent, and not all communities of teacher learners are effective in their pursuits (Townsend & Adams, 2009; Troen & Boles, 2012). The essential ingredients of collaboration in a community of adult learners may be inconsistently applied (or inconsistently understood) by the members of the team, and both success and failure are possible (Smith, Kempster, & Wenger-Trayner, 2019). To meet the *Leadership Quality Standard*, school leaders in Alberta are asked to focus on building positive relationships, collaboration, and teams (Alberta Education, 2018a). As a guiding principle, Alberta Education (2018a) insisted that “principals and school jurisdiction leaders have an important role in fostering collaboration, engagement and empowerment of all partners in the education system to enable all students to achieve their potential” (p. 2). When taken in the context of teacher professional learning and growth, it can be said that school leaders have an obligation to empower, engage, and connect teachers to learning experiences that focus on student success and achievement. Through their research on peer-coaching in teachers’ professional learning, Heui-Baik and Baricaua Gutierrez (2018) argued that “the coach plays a

vital role in making a learning community maximize its learning process by encouraging reflection in areas that are crucial for student learning and development” (p. 217). Townsend and Adams (2009) believed that “a commitment to continuous learning by all members is synonymous with *becoming* rather than *arriving*” in a learning community, and that developing the community be framed “as a journey rather than a destination” (p. 38). In that sense, even an ineffective, inconsistent, or dysfunctional learning community should maintain the hope of revitalization along its journey.

Through their research and writing on teaching teams, Troen and Boles (2012) proposed five conditions of effective teaching teams: task focus, leadership, collaborative climate, personal accountability, and structures and processes. DuFour and DuFour (2012) understood that conditions are important, too; they wrote that “what distinguishes effective principals from their less effective colleagues is that they identify the conditions most vital to the success for their school and concentrate their efforts on creating those conditions” (p. 6). On the cautionary side, Townsend and Adams (2009) warned that “some school leaders...indulge in a form of wishful thinking...on the extent to which they see their schools operating as functional learning communities” (p. 19). Eaker (2002) insisted that merely changing the structure of a school is not enough to move toward an effective PLC model, but that cultural shifts within the school are essential for fundamental change to take place. Among the thirteen critical cultural shifts necessary, Eaker (2002) made note of collaboration, a focus on learning, collective inquiry, and leadership. Regarding leadership, DuFour and Marzano (2009) wrote that principals “will be far more likely to fulfill their primary responsibility of helping more students learn at higher levels” (p. 68) once they prioritize working within collaborative teams instead of relying on traditional teacher supervision methods alone. As is evidenced, several researchers and academics are

considering the important work of PLCs and teacher collaborative learning, and the impacts of this style of teacher professional growth upon student learning outcomes. One aspect that is common to all collaborative efforts in schools is that working together is a social endeavour.

**The social aspects of collaborative professionalism.** Collaboration, and the work of developing collaborative practices, necessarily holds a strong connection to socialization and relies heavily on communication and social interactions. Townsend and Adams (2009) explained their understanding that “as teachers master the skills associated with collaboration, they begin to function more as a team - sharing, encouraging, and supporting each other. This sense of identity and belonging can profoundly impact school culture” (p. 45). Shifting school culture toward collaboration, team-orientation, and positive, supportive relationships, requires the attention of school leadership no matter where it starts. Through their research on building positive organizational alignment and appreciative mindsets, Cherkowski (2018) offered a framework of questions to assist in shifting perspectives of teacher leaders:

- Am I seen? Do I see others? (being known)
  - Am I contributing my strengths? Do I help others to contribute their strengths?  
(difference-making)
  - Am I learning and growing? Do I help others to learn and grow? (professional learning)
  - Am I seeking feedback? Do I give feedback? (appreciation and acknowledgment)
- (p. 70).

Cherkowski (2018) believed that using these questions for reflection “may offer opportunities for teachers to co-construct school cultures where teachers and all others feel known, appreciated, validated, and encouraged to grow and learn” (p. 70). Attending to the social aspects of a school culture and working to understand the complexities of professional collaborative interactions,

will bring a school leader closer to cultivating an environment that values positive relationships and professional learning for student success.

Establishing a supportive environment for adult learning increases the likelihood that authentic collaboration can take place. Attending to aspects of human resources development and adult education, Knowles (1990) acknowledged that in the andragogical model “climate setting is probably the most crucial element” and that “if the climate is not really conducive to learning...then all the other elements in the process are jeopardized” (p. 124). Knowles (1970) also expressed the importance of a very individualistic personal environment that allows for authentic adult learning: that of a learner’s strong orientation to self-directed inquiry and the optimum connection between environment and interaction (p. 51). Although the relationships between an adult learner and their environment relies heavily on intrinsic motivation and high-quality interactions, the collaborative aspect of adult learning in an education setting is also vitally important. Within a group engaging in collaborative inquiry, teams will be most effective when established with high levels of trust and interdependence (Townsend & Adams, 2009). According to Townsend and Adams (2009), “a climate of safety and support encourages movement from congenial discussion toward authentic discourse” (p. 43). Drawing on the work of humanistic psychologists, Knowles (1990) also insisted that “psychological climates experienced by the individuals in them” must be equally “safe, caring, accepting, trusting, respectful, and understanding” (p. 123). While these adjectives may describe aspects of optimal environmental conditions for adult learning, they could also describe personal characteristics and qualities of individuals invited to join the collaborative inquiry. If one doubts the necessity of these elements of environmental, psychological, and social safety within a collaborative team, it takes little time to imagine what collaborative inquiry would look like without them.

Examining collaborative practices in teacher professional learning alongside the importance of relationships and social interactions continues to be a priority for some education researchers (see Freidus et al., 2009; Quintero, 2017; Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018; and Svendsen, 2016). The work of Freidus et al. (2009) reminded readers of the value teachers can find in collaborative, reflective relationships transcending time and context due in large part to a “feeling of membership in a learning community” (p. 189). Quintero (2017) appreciated the value of a learning community, but their research also established the importance of nurturing and fostering collaborative cultures that attend to the nature of teaching and learning while also valuing relationships with the community and neighbourhood. Through researching science teachers who participated in school-embedded collaborative practices, Svendsen (2016) found a strong correlation between learning communities and positive professional development. Svendsen (2016) also noted that “a school can be seen as one community of practice, but teachers participate in multiple communities of practice within their school, with colleagues, students, parents and administrators” (p. 324). Schaap and de Bruijn (2018) indicated, through research about teaching practices in the Netherlands, that alignment and ownership are important to the development of PLCs in educational settings, but just as much is the presence of socialisation. In line with the importance of socialisation, Quintero (2017) argued that teaching and learning are social--not solo--endeavours and that “valuable resources (e.g., information, advice, support) are exchanged through relationships within and across social networks, and that monitoring and strengthening this infrastructure is crucial for educational improvement” (p. 20).

**Collaboration in action.** The work of collaboration, being instrumental to research on teacher professional inquiry and growth, may appear differently in diverse contexts. Collaborative professional learning, growth, and development can occur in many forms and it is

not always easy to undertake. Collaboration can be difficult. DuFour and DuFour (2012) supported school leaders in authentically examining whether the structures within their school support collaboration or isolation. The authors cautioned school leaders against assigning teachers to any form of collaborative team before establishing a deep understanding of school structures that will either support or destabilize efforts toward collaboration (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). Similarly, Troen and Boles (2012) described the many reasons why teaching teams are most likely to fail, including realities such as collaboration being untaught, a lack of teacher leadership, the absence of expertise, assumptions that teachers are natural collaborators, a lack of commitment, and the perceived lack of consequences for when collaboration fails. As Townsend and Adams (2009) admitted, “it is not easy for groups of teachers to suspend their disbelief and commit to such forms of knowledge-generation...and depend so heavily on the evidence of student learning that results from each teacher’s purposeful efforts” (p. 42). There is an element of risk-taking when teachers commit to the type of interdependence and commitment to responsible action that is required of collaborative inquiry and collective action-oriented learning. Despite these challenges, Kabes, Lamb, and Engstrom (2010) saw collaborative cultures as a catalyst toward meaningful personal and professional growth in addition to strong orientations toward fostering teacher leadership. School-based leadership teams and teacher leaders in schools have the difficult task of ensuring a culture of collaboration is possible in their unique contexts. Sparks (2009) was clear when they stated that “it is essential that administrators and teacher leaders create cultures, structures, and processes that require teamwork and the continuous improvement of practice” (p. 50). Within the context of my current school leadership assignment, there has been a shift in culture toward more collaborative, inquiry-focused work in teacher professional growth and learning.

As previously stated, teacher-led inquiry questions and the use of a generative dialogue approach to supporting teacher professional growth has been developing within my current school division for several years. The process of guiding school leader growth and learning was set with purpose, intention, and clear expectations from the beginning, and it aligned with a vision for meaningful collaborative inquiry to support reflective practices and improved student learning. As Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) described it, my school division started by “*building from within*” (p. 1), with the intention of “identifying, locating, and highlighting the people and practices that presently exist within schools and districts, and creating the support structures and processes that will grow effectiveness of the type that develops an internal locus of control” (p. 1). Following a full year of professional learning reserved just for school leaders, division office staff began working in teams to use generative dialogue techniques and inquiry-based growth planning supports to enhance professional learning for school leaders. The purposeful and intentional use of these practices established support structures and processes that would model for school leaders how they in turn could support teams of teachers with inquiry-based professional learning.

The work undertaken in my current context is cited in Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) through the words of our Superintendent Dr. Cheryl Gilmore. As Dr. Gilmore described it, “[o]ver the past three years, our school district has supported the development of generative leadership and has infused an inquiry model of professional learning” (as cited in Adams et al., 2019, p. 207). The establishment of a professional inquiry question tied back to an annual self-assessment each person completed and that was based on the Alberta quality standard (Alberta Education 2018a; 2018b; 2018c) applicable to their role in the division. Following the development of an inquiry question, school leaders and teachers were guided to complete a

learning plan that outlined strategies, outcomes, and indicators of success linking back to the inquiry question. In support of this process, Dr. Gilmore continued by stating: “I feel that generative leadership is changing how we think about learning as leaders, professionals, and staff across the district” (as cited in Adams et al., 2019, p. 209). Through the ongoing use of purposeful and scheduled generative dialogue meetings, teachers met with school leaders to discuss their progress, successes, and challenges in the exploration of their inquiry questions. While the process is far from perfect, Dr. Gilmore outlined that “[a]s staff develop skills and move forward with reflective practice in structures that provide for both collaboration and autonomy, and leaders support this practice as skilled facilitators, we will move closer to being a learning system that is coherent” (as cited in Adams et al., 2019, p. 210).

The work of collaboration can prove challenging in the sometimes emotionally charged atmospheres of schools, when teaching and learning can feel like personal or professional successes and failures. Townsend and Adams (2009) insisted that “[e]ffective leaders of collaborative inquiry can sense the unstated emotional levels in their teams” (p. 71). The authors then indicated that these effective leaders “are more likely to be able to use diversity as an asset, and they are better able to contribute positively to the growth of social networks as they honor the importance of relationships” (Townsend & Adams, 2009, p. 71). Collaboration in action, through the work of collaborative inquiry practices, is therefore complex and contextualized. Similarly, collaborative inquiry practices are predictably not immune to the skepticism of teachers who wonder about the next “latest and greatest” educational trend being promoted. To that end, this study continues to ask the question: According to their own unique contexts and years of teaching experience, what role does inquiry play in teachers’ understanding of professional learning and growth?



### Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to better understand teachers' personal lived experiences as they have undertaken inquiry-based professional learning and growth. This study was grounded in a qualitative ontology, and it considered an in-depth and inductive approach to "make sense of a situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the phenomena under study" (Mertens, 2015, p. 236). Qualitative research in education is done to gather information and ways of knowing from human participants, often by using interviews or observations drawn from settings that are commonly occurring and social in nature (Lichtman, 2010).

Working with practicing teachers to draw out their current experiences with inquiry-based professional learning necessitated an understanding that this work was qualitative in nature. The entry point to this study did not presume or presuppose a working hypothesis or assumption of outcome; responses from teachers directly engaged in this work were the results and determined any conclusions that are made.

Because of the nature of qualitative, inquiry-based research, it was understood that this study allowed for data and information to develop throughout the process. Mertens (2015) insisted "the researcher must be open to a change of focus if that is dictated by the data emerging from the field experience" (p. 262). When working with teachers as individuals and as learners, it was important to understand the complexity of their relationship toward their vocation. Many educators describe teaching as something *they are* as opposed to something *they do*, and so the discussion of their connection to professional growth planning became somewhat personally relevant as well. The data gathering process undertaken with teachers in this study was as personally responsive as the teachers were themselves.

## **Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions**

This study was grounded in qualitative methods, and as such it adhered to those aspects of ontology (an understanding of the nature of reality) and epistemology (an understanding of the nature of knowledge) embedded in qualitative research design and practice. As it relates to methods of qualitative research, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the interpretive research perspective as the most commonly used type, indicating it “assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality” (p. 9). The qualitative design of this study thereby incorporated an interpretive and constructivist epistemological perspective toward knowledge that sought to “describe, understand, [and] interpret” what could be “multiple realities” bound in the context of personal experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 12). Within this vein, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that “qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 15). The ontological assumption of this study was that reality is subject to the interpretation of the participant experiencing a phenomenon, and the epistemological assumption was that knowledge is generated by the experiences of the individual participant, as shared with the researcher.

Mertens (2015) contended that the ontological assumption of the constructivist paradigm is to understand that “[r]eality is socially constructed,” and that “perceptions of reality may change throughout the process of the study” (p. 18). Owing to these socially constructed understandings of reality in the constructivist paradigm, the epistemological assumption warrants “a more personal, interactive mode of data collection” where the “inquirer and the inquired-into are interlocked in an interactive process” (p. 19). This study assumed a process of ontological awareness that the reality of phenomena described and interpreted will be acted upon by both the

researcher and the research participant. Similarly, this study accepted the epistemological underpinning to be one that relied on social engagement to influence the nature of data collection, interpretation, and ultimately knowledge generation. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) continued, “[a] central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds,” and that within constructivism “the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved” (p. 24). Within the framework of a constructivist paradigm, this study therefore undertook a phenomenological perspective toward its methodology.

### **A Phenomenological Perspective**

Phenomenology is rooted in the understanding that individuals interpret and experience phenomena distinctly and uniquely to themselves. Quite literally, phenomenology is the study of how things appear “to humans prior to their theories, constructs, and indirect measurements” (Fischer, 1984, p. 162). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, “[f]rom the philosophy of phenomenology comes a focus on the experience itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (pp. 25-26). This study was designed to elucidate the experiences of practicing teachers, as those experiences related to the teachers’ own understanding and awareness of inquiry-based professional learning. The phenomenon under study was that of teachers’ personal lived experiences as they considered their engagement in professional learning that was grounded in inquiry.

The use of a phenomenological perspective was suited to understanding how teachers experienced inquiry in professional learning because it is the aim of the phenomenologist “to depict the essence or basic structure of experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). The work of phenomenology seeks to understand the impact of moments or events in time for individuals

experiencing these events. One goal of employing a phenomenological methodology is to produce research findings that illustrate the fundamental nature of the phenomena being studied; in fact, determining the “essence” of participant experience is a priority of the phenomenological research process (Giorgi 1997, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Patton 2015). Through his research and writing on curriculum, pedagogy, and “discipline-oriented discourses of curriculum” (p. 3), Aoki (2003) described research that assumes “successful engagement resulting in findings that provide insights into the essence of reality” (p. 3). Aoki (2003) went on to say that “[t]o research, then, is to represent the presence of the essence of reality” (p. 3). Although he explored some limitations of employing this approach to research, Aoki (2003) did so in order to challenge assumptions about education through discourses on curriculum, learning, and living, and to broaden research consideration toward the lived experiences of practicing teachers (Aoki, 1993). Van Manen (2007) described:

The power of phenomenological texts lies precisely in this resonance that the *word* [emphasis added] can effect in our understanding, including those reaches of understanding that are somehow pre-discursive and pre-cognitive and thus less accessible to conceptual and intellectual thought. The creative contingent positioning of words may give rise to evoked images that can move us: inform us by forming us and thus leave an effect on us. (p. 25)

Despite this description, not all phenomenological approaches adhere to the exact same tenets or foundational underpinnings.

Many distinct approaches or traditions specific to the phenomenological perspective have been developed throughout the decades (Giorgi & Giorgi 2010; Giorgi, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Consequently, a distinction must be declared about which approach

was used in this study. As Giorgi (2008) stated, “at this stage of the development of the phenomenological method, there are as many differences among commentators as there are similarities” (p. 2). Additionally, Giorgi (2008) emphasized that without an intentional adherence to one distinct phenomenological tradition, a researcher can easily lose focus; he insisted that “the researcher has to choose one methodologist and stick with the logic proposed by the methodologist” (p. 2). Accordingly, this study based its methods on the guidance and road map described by Giorgi (1997, 2008; see also, Giorgi & Giorgi, 2010), which is deeply rooted in the Husserlian phenomenological tradition. Additionally, this study drew upon the work of other scholars (Fischer, 1984; Fischer & Wertz, 2002) whose research falls within the Husserlian approach depicted by Giorgi and established within the work of the Duquesne University tradition.

Giorgi and Giorgi (2010) proposed a succinct explanation of *descriptive pre-transcendental Husserlian phenomenology*, which follows four general steps to the method:

- (1) one obtains a concrete description of a phenomenon as lived through by a person, either directly described or by interview, and before analyzing the description, the researcher assumes the phenomenological attitude,...
- (2) Once a sense of the whole has been established, the researcher goes back to the beginning of the description and begins to read it again, more slowly, and establishes ‘meaning units,’ that is, parts of the description that seem to convey a delineated but partial meaning of the whole...
- (3) When the second step is completed, the researcher returns to the beginning and starts transforming each meaning unit into expressions that more directly convey the psychological sense of what the research participant said...
- (4) Finally, based upon the transformed meaning units that have been derived, a general structure of the experience

of the phenomenon is articulated. (pp. 6-7)

To summarize, within this description of the Husserlian methodology as described by Giorgi, the researcher will: obtain a description of the phenomenon; read and re-read the description within the phenomenological attitude before establishing the ‘meaning units;’ transform the unique ‘meaning units’ to direct expressions or statements from the research participant; and, articulate a final, general structure of the phenomenological description.

In addition to these steps, the complementary processes of *phenomenological reduction* and *free imaginative variation* are important precepts of this approach. Creely (2018) wrote that “in educational terms, the ‘reduction’ locates that which is most central to a person’s meaningful learning experiences in the world or the objects of learning in the person’s Lifeworld” (p. 109). To further frame this methodology within the Husserlian phenomenological method, and to make every effort to meet the criteria as such, phenomenological reduction must be employed by the researcher. The process of phenomenological reduction takes on two important meanings. According to Giorgi (2008), the first meaning is that “the researcher has to bracket personal past knowledge and all other theoretical knowledge not based on direct intuition...so that full attention can be given to the instance of the phenomenon that is currently appearing to his or her consciousness” (p. 3). Giorgi (2008) shared the second meaning that “the researcher withholds the positing of the existence or reality of the object or state of affairs that he or she is beholding” (p. 3). The purpose of bracketing is twofold: to acknowledge and understand the influence of past personal knowledge that could distract the researcher from fully understanding the phenomenon presented; and to compel the researcher to avoid placing their own conceptions of reality upon the phenomenon being described. As Patton (2015) described it, “[t]he experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the

phenomenon” (p. 116), and the experiences of the researcher must also be duly considered. In fact, according to Giorgi (2008) “the major point is that the biases must be recognized in the very process of analysis” (p. 3), not simply ignored or set aside.

Free imaginative variation is another aspect of Husserl’s phenomenological tradition that requires attention within this methodology. The purpose of imaginative variation is to “discover essential characteristics of the phenomenon being investigated” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 3) by considering elements of the described phenomenon through different viewpoints. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contended that imaginative variation “involves viewing the data from various perspectives, as if one were walking around a modern sculpture, seeing different things from different angles” (p. 27). Alongside its purpose of carefully considering the phenomenon from different perspectives, imaginative variation also enables the researcher to hold the phenomenon studied within a specific research discipline (Giorgi, 2008). To Giorgi (1997), the “method of free imaginative variation plays a key role to help establish essential intuitions along disciplinary lines” (p. 247). Giorgi (1997) believed that “the key point here is that in this step the statements of the subjects are transformed by the researcher to be in accord with the researcher’s disciplinary institution, which become stabilized after the process of free imaginative variation” (p. 247). Careful consideration of the elements of the described phenomenon, alongside viewing the component units of the description from different perspectives according to the requisite disciplinary intuition, yield the essential salient aspects of the description.

### **Phenomenology vs. Narrative Inquiry**

Another form of qualitative research is that of narrative inquiry, and it is important to make a distinction between this frequently used qualitative methodology and the phenomenological approach proposed for this study. Regarding narrative inquiry, Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) explained that “key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 34). Narrative inquiry does have similarities to the phenomenological method “as a source of understanding the meaning of human experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). Patton (2015) described how a narrative inquiry researcher relies on interviews and the written word to capture stories from research participants; transcribes the unique narratives; analyzes the transcripts for themes and patterns; and finally generates knowledge about the individual participants or society in general (p. 128). Akin to this process is the accounting of the phenomenological method from Giorgi and Giorgi (2010), including obtaining a description of a lived phenomenon, establishing ‘meaning units’ within the description, transcribing each meaning unit into an expression of what was said, and finally creating an articulate general structure of the phenomenon (pp. 6-7). The phenomenological method seeks to deeply understand the essence of a personally lived experience, or phenomenon, as described and held in the context of human consciousness. Core to both narrative inquiry and phenomenological process is the importance of holding human experiences at the centre of the research methodology, yet there are important differences between the two qualitative approaches.

Phenomenology very much emphasizes the importance of privileging the essence of the individual experience being shared; revealing the phenomenon being studied becomes the solitary pursuit. The researcher’s voice is acknowledged but removed from the phenomenological description through the process of bracketing. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990):

Narrative inquiry is, however, a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds. In the process of beginning to live the shared



story of narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard. (p. 4)

In a deep sense, “[w]hen one engages in narrative inquiry the process becomes even more complex, for, as researchers, we become part of the process. The two narratives of participant and researcher become, in part, a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). In the phenomenological approach to qualitative research, it is acknowledged that the researcher is part of the process; however, the researcher’s own narrative is not revealed through a shared construction or collaborative restorying of the narrative.

Both narrative inquiry and phenomenology use conversational interviews as one method of gathering data; in this study, interviews were the sole source of participant personal lived experience descriptions. Within the narrative inquiry approach to interview collection, “interviews are conducted between researcher and participant, transcripts are made, the meetings are made available for further discussion, and they become part of the ongoing narrative record” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Co-developing or co-constructing the narrative between researcher and participant is important within the narrative inquiry. However, according to Giorgi and Giorgi (2010), “the specialized phenomenological attitude is very different from the natural attitude” and “the researcher does not posit the phenomenon he or she is experiencing to be real (even if it is) but merely considers it to be a presence to the experiencing person” (p. 7). The phenomenological researcher, therefore, approaches the participant’s accounting of personal lived experience (in this study, a transcript of the conversational interview which describes the phenomena under investigation) in a way that is wholly different than that of a narrative inquirer. Furthermore, the narrative inquiry approach to qualitative research takes on the nature of

storytelling in a way that phenomenology is not interested in. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described that narrative inquiries “need to be soft, or perhaps gentle... What is at stake is the creation of situations of trust in which the storytelling urge, so much a part of the best parts of our social life, finds expression” (p. 12). The phenomenological approach makes efforts to carefully study the interview transcript as it is, without bias, judgment, or interpretation, while developing the essence of the phenomenon; an approach very different from that of narrative inquiry.

### **Assumptions**

It is common practice for teachers in the province of Alberta to engage in ongoing professional learning. Within schools, school divisions, the Alberta Teachers’ Association, and the Government of Alberta (through Alberta Education), it is commonly understood that teachers will participate in professional growth and development throughout each school year and across the expanse of a career in education (Government of Alberta, 2015). One assumption this study made was that teachers are aware of their obligation to participate in professional learning as it relates to diverse aspects of their careers. In crafting plans for their professional learning each year, teachers may attend to instructional practice and student needs, school-based priorities, school division initiatives, trends in education, and/or in meeting the goals of a government ministry. It is required that teachers make annual plans for professional learning.

Teachers in Alberta participate in the process of writing a professional growth plan each year. This study assumed that Alberta teachers are supported in developing their professional growth plans (sometimes called a professional learning plan) by school leaders, colleagues, and division office personnel and resources. In carrying out their plans for growth, teachers may require access to professional materials, time to collaborate with colleagues, or funds to use for

conference registration and travel expenses. Because teachers create their own professional growth plans, they are also able to select unique strategies and outcomes to match their learning goals for that school year. While teachers review their plans with school-based leaders a minimum of twice annually (commonly once in the fall and once in the spring), it is largely incumbent on the professional educator in Alberta to develop, monitor, sustain, and report back on the success of their annual professional growth plan each year. Teachers in the participating school division, with the support and supervision of school leadership teams, understand and fulfill the obligation to their professional growth planning; this is common practice. Additionally, most professional staff within this division had two or more years of experience with using inquiry as a tool for professional learning and growth. Despite the various years of teaching experience held by teachers in the participating division, selecting participants for this study brought the researcher toward a group of professionals that held some basic common understandings.

### **Sampling: Participant Selection**

It is often remarked that there are stages of teacher development that coincide with years of experience (Huberman, 1989; Richards, 2005; Coombs et al., 2018; Furner & McCulla, 2019). Reference is made to teachers in their first five years of teaching as it relates to being new and novice to the profession (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2013; Clandinin et al., 2015). In their next several years, teachers build their skills as they gain experience in years six through fourteen. During this time teachers will often begin to have experiences sharing knowledge with new members of the staff, and mentoring student teachers. Beyond fifteen years of experience, teachers are generally considered to have a great amount of teaching experience and are very much considered to be veteran teachers. Teachers with fifteen or more years of experience are

also usually understood to have extensive knowledge, a robust professional learning background, and significant teaching experience to draw from. Additionally, these experienced or veteran teachers will have the most in situ practice developing teacher professional growth plans. These broad time markers of experience level can be understood to represent general milestones in a teacher's career.

For the purpose of this study, the aim of participant selection was to find nine practicing teachers who would engage in the interview process regarding their experiences with inquiry-based professional learning. Three teachers were interviewed who were in their first five years of teaching, three more represented a cohort in years six through fourteen, and finally three participants had fifteen or more years of teaching experience. Determining the number of individuals to participate in this phenomenological study was not random or arbitrary. In describing data collection activities among qualitative inquiry and research design types, Creswell (1998) indicated that a phenomenological researcher would typically interview up to 10 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that an appropriate number of participant interviews in a phenomenological study would range from 5 – 25. In a later publication, Creswell (2014) wrote that “[f]rom my review of many qualitative research studies I have found...phenomenology to typically range from three to ten” (p. 189) interview participants during the data collection stage. It was determined that nine individual interviews within this current study would be an appropriate, and phenomenologically consistent, number of participants to engage.

Years of teaching experience were used in participant selection for this study, and respondents to the interview request were selected based on their teaching experience levels (see Appendix A for text version of the online survey used for participant selection). Much previous

research has been focused on the first five years of teaching and early-years attrition rates for Alberta teachers. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2013) conducted a five-year study focused on the experiences of early years teachers in the province and noted "[d]uring their first years of teaching, beginning teachers experience periods of intense overwork" (p. 4). Educators within their first five years of teaching were an important group to study because of the intensity of these early teaching experiences. Again, the Alberta Teachers' Association (2013) indicated by the fourth or fifth year of teaching "many participants were pulling back due to exhaustion and family commitments" (p. 4). According to Clandinin et al. (2015), "there is a spike in the number of Alberta teachers who leave teaching at the end of their third and fourth years" (p. 2). The authors noted that in their analysis of research literature "there was a tendency to focus on individual factors or contextual factors to explain, or account for, the reasons teachers left teaching in their first five years" (Clandinin et al., 2015, p. 12). While this study was interested in a phenomenological approach to understanding teachers' experiences with inquiry-based professional learning writ large, it seemed important to also specifically include participants within their first five years of teaching in order to more fully inform the phenomenon under investigation.

Other researchers have diverse understanding of how best to delineate teachers' experience levels into distinct categories. According to Huberman (1989), deeper research was necessary "to understand how teachers' careers play out and which are the most influential determinants, within and outside the institution" (p. 31). Different research studies in education ascribe their own criteria and parameters in determining teachers' experience into sets of experience milestones. Richards (2005) categorized three careers stages as: "(1) 1-5 years; (2) 6-10 years; and (3) 11+ years of experience" (p. 2). Following an extensive literature review,

Furner and McCulla (2019) came to five descriptive phases within a teacher's career: "early career teachers (up to 3 years' teaching experience); experienced teachers (4–7 years); expert teachers (over 8 years in the profession); leading teachers (holding formal leadership roles within the school); and school executive (principals and teachers at deputy level)" (p. 510).

Representing a narrower approach, Coombs et al. (2018) outlined a four-stage model:

(a) initial preservice teacher (start of teacher education program), (b) beginning in-service teacher (post-teacher education program), (c) early in-service teacher (in-service teacher with five years or less years of experience), and (d) established in-service teacher (in-service teacher with greater than 5 years of experience). (p. 137)

Although Huberman (1989) admitted that "identifying phases or stages in teaching is both uneven and inconclusive," he indicated "[t]here are, however, some reasonably strong trends that recur across studies" (p. 33). A cursory listing of Huberman's (1989) phases, from most novice to most experienced, are: Survival and Discovery (years 1 – 3); Stabilization (years 4 – 6); Experimentation/Activism or Taking Stock: Self-Doubts (years 7 – 18); Serenity or Conservatism (years 19 – 30); and Disengagement (years 31 – 40).

Since the purpose of this study was not to examine or critique previous research on the career life cycles of teachers in Alberta, a straightforward and simple, albeit informed, determination was made regarding the phases of career development considered during participant selection. The first stage, representing survival and the early career, encompassed zero to five years of experience. The second stage considered, career stabilization and experimentation, represented years six through 14. Finally, the third career stage presented in this study, an established career through experience, was comprised of 15 or more years of teaching.

Accordingly, a diverse group of participants were selected from a cross-section of teaching experience levels (Years 0-5; Years 6-14; and Years 15+). Although administrative teachers in Alberta (principals, vice-principals, assistant principals) are members of the ATA, and even though many school leaders carry an active teaching load, current school-based leaders were excluded from this research study. Verifying the part-time teaching workload of a school-based administrator alongside full-time classroom teachers, was beyond the scope of this study. Respondents participating in the study were selected based on the primary criteria of their in-service status and years of teaching experience. What follows in Table 3 is an illustration of what was previously described:

Table 3

*Participant Selection for Conversational Interviews*

	Career Stage	Years of Teaching Experience	Number of Participants
Group 1	Survival and the Early Career	0 – 5 Years	3
Group 2	Career Stabilization and Experimentation	6 – 14 Years	3
Group 3	Established Career through Experience	15 or More Years	3
		Total Participants	9

There were nine teachers selected for interviews in this study. As indicated in Table 3, the teachers selected to participate met the criteria of years of teaching experience outlined. In addition to this requirement, participating teachers were required to meet the criteria of having experienced inquiry-based professional learning in some capacity during their career. Creswell

(1998) indicated this type of participant sampling, *criterion sampling*, “works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 118). This sampling technique is appropriate for phenomenological studies, and “[i]t is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). All teachers, despite their years of experience, require access to high quality, meaningful, and relevant professional learning opportunities. As Campbell (2017) attested, “[t]eachers at different stages of their career and life also require equitable access to quality professional learning, whether as a beginning teacher, an experienced teacher, or transitioning into formal leadership and beyond” (p. 22). Once participants representing these different career stages were selected, the process of understanding teachers’ personal lived experiences as they undertook inquiry-based professional learning and growth began with data collection.

### **Data Collection: Interviews**

The first stage of data collection for this study was comprised of individual interviews with the selected participants (see Appendix B for the email template sent to participants selected for an interview). As described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “[t]o get at the essence or basic structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection” (p. 27). There was one conversational interview conducted per participant to ensure that each teacher could share perspectives and experiences with the researcher. Interviews followed the same scripted interview questions to offer consistency and accuracy in the data collection. Questions seeking depth of response or further contextualization were determined by the researcher at the time of the interview. There were nine individual interviews conducted for the purpose of gathering data from participating teachers.



The general guiding questions were consistent and the same for each interview. The conversational interviews each followed the same format and began with a review of the informed consent process, an introduction to the study (including a review of professional learning and inquiry) and asking the participant if they had any questions before we began (see Appendix C for full interview script). The following questions were used during the individual interviews with participants:

- a. To start the interview off, please describe your current teaching assignment, and if possible, describe the pathway you took to where you are now. (Sub-questions may include: What are your total years of teaching experience? How many years have you been at your current school? What types of schools have you worked at? What types of teaching positions have you held? What types of contracts have you held?)
- b. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry as it relates to you as a teacher. (Sub-questions may include: What experiences do you have with inquiry as it relates to other teachers in your school or division? What experiences do you have with inquiry as it relates to teachers in other jurisdictions? If you have worked in another jurisdiction, what experiences did you have with inquiry as it related to your teaching role there?)
- c. Describe your personal experiences with the role that inquiry plays in your professional learning. (Sub-questions may include: What experiences have you had with inquiry approaches being offered through conferences or workshops you have attended? What other experiences have you had with an inquiry approach to professional learning, or more traditionally, professional development?)
- d. Describe your personal experiences with the role that professional inquiry plays in your professional growth plan. (Sub-questions may include: Is an inquiry-based model one that

you use to develop your professional growth plan? In what ways do you experience an inquiry-based approach to creating, living out, and reflecting on your professional growth plan?)

- e. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry as it plays a role professional learning throughout your school. (Sub-questions may include: What are your experiences with collaborative inquiry within your school? What are your experiences working with other teachers to answer an inquiry question? What are your experiences with inquiry-based learning as a school-wide professional learning approach?)
- f. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry-based professional learning compared to your experiences with more traditional professional development activities.
- g. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry-based professional growth plans versus more traditional goal-based teacher professional growth plans.
- h. Describe a time when you thought using an inquiry-based approach to professional learning did, or did not, assist you in fulfilling the objectives of your growth plan. (Sub-questions may include: What experiences have you had when inquiry-based approaches to growth and learning were not helpful to you? What experiences have you had when inquiry-based approaches to growth and learning were helpful to you?)
- i. Finally, describe the experiences you have had that make you believe that inquiry has had an influence on your teaching practice?

The purpose of the individual, conversational interviews was to determine the unique positioning of each respondent participating in the study. Offering each participant an opportunity to provide individualized responses from their own lived professional experiences as a teacher and an

inquirer allowed their perspective to be included in the study. The series of questions proposed in the individual teacher interviews were meant to primarily illustrate individual experiences.

Interviews were conducted following all necessary COVID-19 protocols, and the option to participate through an online ZOOM interview was offered to each interviewee. An audio recording of each interview was collected. Notes were taken by the researcher throughout the interview, but the audio recording served as the primary record source of the individual interview (see Appendix D for the letter of informed consent for interviewees to participate in audio recording). Following the interview, the audio recording was transcribed to create a print transcript of each conversational interview. For reasons discussed in the next section, participant checks were not required to support the trustworthiness of the research. Transcripts were not returned to interview participants for verification or revision. Every effort was made to conduct the interviews in a setting free from distractions for both the researcher and the participant. The interview locations were chosen on the consideration of a neutral space to once again avoid any power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, an ideal location for the interview was an online environment that had minimal distractions and low background noise (for the audio recording). Respect for the comfort of participants was expressed by consulting participants on the location and timing of the interview.

### **Trustworthiness**

Part of the creation of trustworthiness within the phenomenological process is to understand the data through a lens of the specific discipline within which the research is established. In their discussion of the verification of findings in phenomenological research, Giorgi (2008) insisted that “since there is a disciplinary perspective, the findings should be loaded with the discipline’s orientation, which again means that some expertise is required in

order to understand the results” (p. 5). Underscoring this description was an understanding that the research findings of this study must be discussed in the context of educational research; the subject area specialization of this research was that of educational leadership, with a specific focus on teacher professional learning and inquiry. To avoid discussion of this disciplinary perspective would mean undermining the descriptive verification of findings, and it would weaken the overall phenomenological value of the study. Giorgi (2008) continued, “[t]he purpose of the research is not to clarify the experience that the individuals have for their own sake, but for the sake of the discipline” (p. 5). For the purpose of trustworthiness, it was imperative to include acknowledgement of the subject discipline perspective through which the phenomenological study took place.

Within the phenomenological discipline, it is not required to return to the subject or research participant to conduct a verification or authentication of the research findings. Fischer and Wertz (2002) admitted they have “gone back to [their] subjects for clarification of the transcription and again later for the subject’s impression of whether [the] synopsis adequately represents his or her experience” (p. 288). Although these authors described instances where they have returned to research participants to consult during the analysis stage of research, in this instance they relied solely on their transcripts (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 288). With respect to trustworthiness and reliability in phenomenological research, Giorgi (2008) has a somewhat more convincing argument regarding participant review than that offered by Fischer and Wertz (2002). Giorgi (2008) rejects the premise that phenomenological researchers conduct participant verification and participant review to enhance the trustworthiness of the work. Giorgi’s (2008) first argument was that “participants describe their experiences from the perspective of everyday life, from the perspective of the natural attitude” (p. 5). It rests for Giorgi (2008) that a properly

executed phenomenological analysis can only be verified by phenomenological procedures, ergo, “[i]t cannot be assumed that the ordinary person is aware of those procedures, so the so-called verification by the participant has to remain dubious” (p. 5). If the participant is not familiar with phenomenological research methods within a disciplinary perspective, they are not prepared to conduct the verification of findings.

Giorgi (2008) was not advocating that research findings be withheld from the participants in the research; however, participant access to the findings should not be for the purpose of authentication or verification. Giorgi (2008) insisted that “the findings should be mediated by the researcher so that they can be made comprehensible for the participant” (p. 5); this, again, speaks to the nature of phenomenological research being grounded in procedures that may not be accessible (or even interesting) to the research subject. One last caution that Giorgi (2008) made in his case against participant involvement in analysis of research findings was that “[p]articipants are surely privileged when it comes to what they *experienced*, but not necessarily concerning the *meaning* of their experience” (p. 6). He went on to say that “there is no privilege on the part of the experiencer, and to use participants as validity checks is thus not trustworthy” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 6). Although Fischer and Wertz (2002) cited time constraints for not returning to the original subjects of their research, they do not insist that participants must be used as validity checks.

Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007) wrote about trustworthiness and authenticity within the context of rigor in naturalistic approaches to research. First describing rigor in a conventional sense, then explaining rigor in a naturalistic sense, the authors offered brief detail of the axioms underpinning naturalistic evaluations and provide parallel criteria for trustworthiness that compare to conventional approaches. The authors’ descriptions of unique criteria for authenticity

are relevant to this discussion and include: fairness, ontological authentication, educative authentication, catalytic authentication, and tactical authenticity. Of these five criteria for authenticity, ontological authentication and educative authentication are the two which most speak to phenomenology. Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007) explained that an ontological authentication process can “simply mean the increased appreciation of some set of complexities previously not appreciated at all, or appreciated only poorly” (p. 22); a goal that is shared by the phenomenological researcher. Regarding educative authentication, Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007) wrote that:

At a minimum, however, the evaluator’s responsibility ought to extend to ensuring that those persons who have been identified during the course of the evaluation as gatekeepers to various constituencies and stakeholding audiences ought to have the opportunity to be “educated” in the variety of perspectives and value systems that exist in a given context.  
(p. 23)

To acknowledge the process of authenticating this phenomenological research, ontological validation understands that illuminating the previously underappreciated experiences of teachers’ experiences increased the trustworthiness of this study. Additionally, providing the teacher participants with the opportunity to become “educated” on this research (by sharing back the completed thesis), allowed for the educative authentication process to unfold as well. A participant check was not necessary to increase the trustworthiness of this study; however, this study did meet criteria for ontological authentication since it illuminated the teachers’ experiences and reinforced the trustworthiness of their descriptive phenomena by holding them in new light. This study also met educative authentication procedures by providing access to the completed thesis to allow participating teachers to learn from the process, findings, and

discussion. It is not necessary that teacher participants seek out the completed research, but the final thesis was made available upon request.

### **Generalizability of Results**

Giorgi (2008) acknowledged that researchers experience confusion around the generalizability of phenomenological data (p. 4). Within qualitative research methodologies, caution is often placed around the question of generalizing the data and results. An assumption is made that because deep descriptions and understandings are generated through relatively small sample sizes, and since quantifiable “hard data” is not present, there must be limitations to the generalizability of the results. Giorgi (2008) insisted that as long as a researcher “can employ the eidetic reduction, with the help of imaginative variation, [they] can obtain an eidetic intuition into the state of affairs and describe an essential finding that is intrinsically general” (p. 4). This is not to say that all qualitative research results are inherently generalizable; the caveat here is that if the phenomenological approach is followed, including the eidetic reduction (through the use of imaginative variation), a researcher may develop results that are essential findings and that may be generalizable.

An error that could be made in preparing the results of this type of qualitative study, would be to improperly follow phenomenological procedures. During his further description, Giorgi (2008) cautioned that:

If one does not employ the eidetic reduction and arrive at an essence or some other type of eidetic invariant concerning the concrete, detailed description of an experienced phenomenon by one or several participants, proper phenomenological procedures have not been followed. (p. 4)

What was salient here was to avoid creating a straightforward summary of teachers’ personal

lived experiences like a storied description found in a different qualitative approach. The phenomenological approach included an eidetic reduction created using the imaginative variation, which was therefore clearly able to distinguish “sufficiently what belonged to the phenomenon and what belonged to the individual” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 4).

### **Data Analysis**

The work of Fischer and Wertz (2002) provided the foundation of the data analysis within this study. The authors described in detail their process of creating an empirical phenomenological analysis of individual accounts of being criminally victimized, and their data analysis techniques provided the model upon which this phenomenological study finds its grounding. Fischer and Wertz (2002) acknowledged their deep connections to Giorgi, Duquesne University, and the phenomenological methods developed over decades of thought, research, and experimentation. The authors expressed that “at Duquesne our best developed general research method has been one formalized and developed by Amadeo Giorgi” (p. 277). They continued by saying they “ask subjects to describe in detail some particular situation they have experienced, and then document step by step how the researcher culls from the description its essential psychological constituents” (p. 277). By grounding the data analysis of this research study in the methodology of Giorgi, and following the procedures laid out by Fisher and Wertz (2002), the analysis of data took shape within the context of the phenomenological tradition.

As previously stated, qualitative data was gathered through teacher participation in individual conversational interviews with the researcher. Transcriptions of each interview were developed based on audio recordings gathered during the individual interviews. The nine unique, conversational interviews with participants were recorded digitally as mp3 files. It is not uncommon for researchers to employ third party transcription services in the development of a

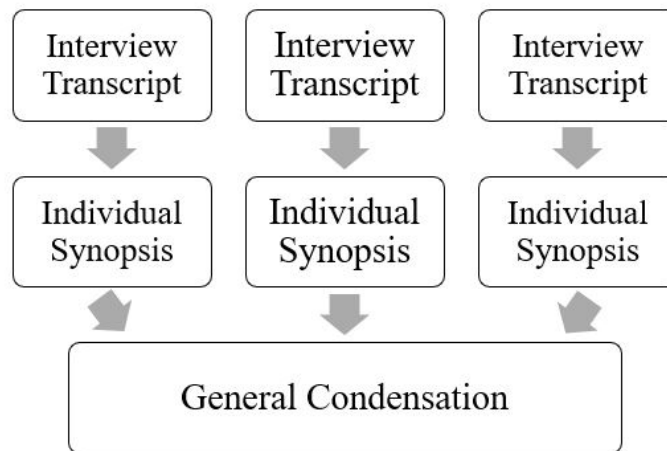


first draft of interview transcripts. I used a transcription service (Transcript Heroes Transcription Services Inc.) to convert the mp3 files of each interview to a text document based on the audio recordings. The first step in the data analysis process was to compare the audio recording versions of each interview to the first draft transcriptions created by the contracted service. Through a phenomenological approach, the purpose of this study was to better understand teachers' personal lived experiences as they have undertaken inquiry-based professional learning and growth; therefore, beginning with highly accurate transcripts of each interview was important. The work of Fischer and Wertz (2002) informed the data analysis process of interpreting the individual conversational interview results and the transcriptions of the case synopses.

Fischer and Wertz (2002) described their approach as one of “empirical phenomenological psychology...as developed at Duquesne University” (p. 276); embedded in the works of Giorgi and other scholars from that school and research methodology. The work of Fischer and Wertz (2002) was made not simply to conform to a consistent phenomenological approach to their research methodology and data analysis, but to also “develop [qualitative research] in ways that continue to assure consensual validity and replicability” (p. 276). According to the authors, their emphasis on “empirical” analysis referred to “(a) our reflection upon actual events, and to (b) our making available to colleagues the data and steps of analysis that led to our findings—so they might see for themselves whether and how they could come to similar findings” (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 277). Fischer and Wertz (2002) outlined five forms of findings: individual case synopses, illustrated narrative, general condensation, exemplar (post-general) case synopses, and general psychological structure (p. 281). For the purpose of this study, individual case synopses were used to analyze the participant interview transcripts, and

the general condensation technique was employed in analyzing the conversational interviews as sets based upon years of teaching experience self-reported by research participants (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Phenomenological Steps Used to Create the General Condensation



*Figure 1.* Following the conversational interview, digital audio recording files were transcribed into a word document. This document was compared against the original audio file and a final transcript was created. The phenomenological method was used to create an individual synopsis of each interview transcript. The individual synopses were then grouped together based on teachers’ years of teaching experience, and one general condensation of the findings was written.

### **Individual Case Synopses**

The use of individual case synopses came from an understanding of the personal relevance to individual subjects experiencing a phenomenon, alongside the recognition of that which was “personally critical” to an individual’s experience (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 280). A phenomenological approach to qualitative research understands that individual descriptions of the experience being studied provides the basis for descriptive analysis. According to Fisher and Wertz (2002), “case synopses provide readers with concrete examples that reverberate within their own lives, thus intimating the full structure of the phenomenon” (p. 285). The decision to

use individual case synopses of the conversational interview transcriptions within this study was based on the goal of providing a succinct phenomenological description of using inquiry methods in teacher professional learning and growth.

Through Giorgi and Giorgi (2010), it is understood that the basic steps of analysis within the philosophical phenomenological method are: acquiring the concrete description of the phenomenon; re-reading the description to determine ‘meaning units’; transforming ‘meaning units’ to expressions that convey the psychological description of what was said; and developing the general structure of the phenomenon based on the descriptive meaning units (p. 6). Within Giorgi and Giorgi’s (2010) explanation, ‘meaning units’ are “parts of the description that seem to convey a delineated but partial meaning of the whole” (p. 6). Following this method involved transcribing conversational interviews with participants, reading through the transcripts to identify cohesive meaning units, creating distinct expressions/statements based on each meaning unit, and then developing the general structure of the phenomenon. Fischer and Wertz (2002) detailed their process of creating individual case synopses using the following approach: “(a) *familiarization* with the transcriptions by re-readings; (b) *demarcating* transcriptions into numbered units; (c) casting these units into *temporal order*; (d) *organizing* clusters of units into scenes; (e) *condensing* these organized units into nonrepetitive narrative form with nonessential facts dropped” (emphasis in original) (p. 286). It is clear Fischer and Wertz (2002) described a phenomenological method that closely aligned to Giorgi and Giorgi’s (2010) later description of the basic approach to phenomenological analysis.

The following phenomenological method was used to create the nine individual case synopses from individual conversational interviews with teachers:

1. Conducting and recording interviews with participants, subsequently using a transcription service to transcribe the interviews to a verbatim description of the interview; draft transcripts were contrasted against the original audio recordings and a final, accurate draft of each interview transcript was completed by the researcher;
2. Becoming familiar with the transcripts by reading and re-reading using a “phenomenological attitude” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2010), with the intent to identify specific ‘meaning units’;
3. Demarcating unique meaning units and numbering each, allowing the researcher “return to the original transcription for context” (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 286);
4. Clustering like units (gathering distinguishable and delineated parts of the whole) and transforming the cluster into an expression which retains the psychological meaning;
5. Ordering, organizing, and condensing the expressions into a nonrepetitive general structure of the phenomenon as it was described to the researcher.

Within their own description of the individual case synopsis process, Fischer and Wertz (2002) explained the steps are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather “a means of the researcher’s becoming and staying in touch with all of the transcription, and of encouraging [the researcher] to struggle with alternate ways of presenting the unitariness of an experience’s different aspects” (p. 287). When the researcher embarks on this “struggle” with different aspects of the experience and alternative ways of considering or presenting the phenomenon, they engage in imaginative variation; a key aspect of Husserlian phenomenology described in multiple literature locations (Giorgi, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) reminded that “[t]hrough imaginative variation, the researcher develops enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes” (p. 576) within a phenomenological description.

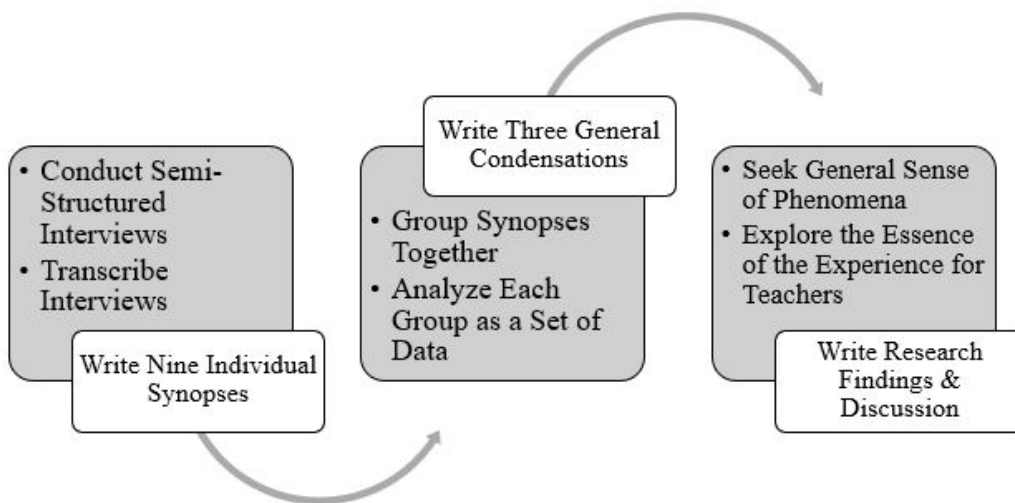
## **General Condensation**

Creating individual case synopses based on the experiences of the interview participants is a procedure that can be used within a phenomenological method of research. This researcher undertook the process of becoming intimately acquainted with each interview by comparing the transcripts to the audio recordings of each interview. This process of reading and re-reading into the text of the transcripts allowed for the hearing and the seeing into the texts—the living of the phenomena through the description of the research participant. The descriptions of personally relevant phenomena, as told to the researcher through conversational interviews, served as the foundation for a synopsis that sought the “essence” of the personal lived experience, or “the most invariant meaning for a context” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242). Following the creation of the nine individual case synopses, unique participant experiences were finally considered together within the context of the previously described criteria of their years of teaching experience. Fischer and Wertz (2002) explained that “[w]e refer to these “Individual Case Synopses” also as “procedural synopses” since we later draw the General Condensation from what runs in common through them” (p. 280). In the analysis of the data collected, each synopsis was considered within the context of a general condensation alongside the synopses of teachers with similar years of teaching experience.

Fischer and Wertz (2002), in their work with persons being criminally victimized, created general condensations based on previously written transcriptions. The authors explained that within the general condensation process “[w]e asked the...Individual Case Synopses, as well as other transcriptions, ‘What is essential to all these personal meanings? How do they reveal the existential (including social) meaning of being criminally victimized?’” (p. 281). Fischer and Wertz (2002) described writing “in general terms that collapsed / gathered the concrete

expressions of earlier findings” (p. 281). In this study, the individual case synopses created from participant interview transcripts were coalesced into a general condensation that sought to “express the bare essentials of this experience briefly and accurately, encompassing all individual cases” (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 292) that were relevant to the theme of the condensation (see Figure 2). For example, the synopses of the three participants with five or fewer years of experience were united in a general condensation, and the synopses of the three participants who had 15+ years of experience formed another condensation of phenomena. Fischer and Wertz (2002) reminded that “one must stick close to the data, often returning to the transcriptions for a fuller sense of the experience and for a check on the accuracy of one’s generalizations” (p. 292).

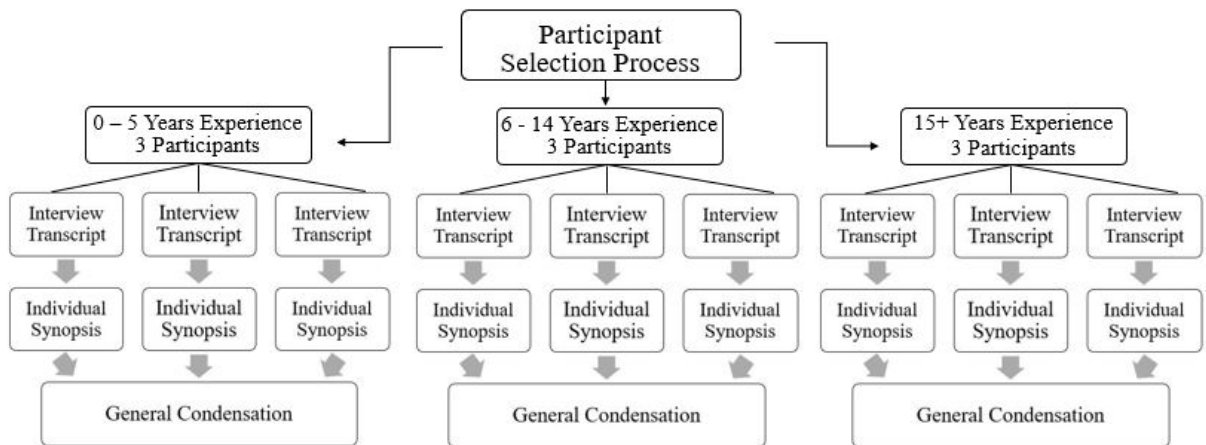
**Figure 2.** Outline of Research Stages for Data Gathering and Analysis



*Figure 2.* Following the creation of nine unique synopses, groups of three synopses were considered together based on teachers’ years of experience. Analyzed as a set of data, each group of three yielded one general condensation. Using the three general condensations, the researcher sought a general sense of the phenomena presented.

One distinct advantage of the general condensation method is “its provision of a succinct sense of the phenomenon” and the fact that it represents “a form of the findings that can be kept in mind by a wide readership” (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, p. 293). Within this study, conversational interviews were conducted with participants about their personal lived experience with inquiry as a component of professional learning and growth. Interviews were subsequently transcribed into concrete, verbatim descriptions of the dialogue between participant and interviewer. Once each transcription was complete, an individual case synopsis was created by the researcher, using a phenomenological attitude and procedures that followed the guidelines of Giorgi and Giorgi (2010) and Fischer and Wertz (2002). The research then yielded nine interview transcripts and nine individual case synopses. Once completed, the synopses were gathered into three distinct analysis groups which then formed the basis of general condensation transcriptions; one for each cluster of participants based on their self-reported years of teaching experience (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** An Overall Phenomenological Process for Data Analysis



*Figure 3.* Process diagram outlining the data analysis techniques used to present the phenomena of teachers’ personal lived experiences related to this research study.

## **Researcher Positionality**

Exploration of researcher positionality was important to reducing any instances of possible researcher preconception associated with this study of teachers' responses. Declarations of positionality were important to address before embarking on this type of qualitative research. In their description of phenomenological procedures, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that before "interviewing those who have had direct experience with the phenomenon, the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions" (p. 27). As the researcher undertakes the work of reviewing their past experiences, they engage in the process of bracketing (Giorgi 2008, Patton 2015). A phenomenological research study must necessarily include understanding of the phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2008), and essential to this reduction is that "[t]he researcher has to bracket personal past knowledge and all other theoretical knowledge not based on direct intuition" (p. 3). Patton (2015) described bracketing in the context of the phenomenological reduction as an "analytical process, [wherein] the researcher brackets out the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions" (p. 575). Conducting research within the institution that one works can present some challenges related to researcher positionality and those challenges needed to be addressed.

Positional authority was considered in order to avoid any concerns that respondents were coerced into participating in the study or that factors of ascendant or descendent power overtly influenced participants' responses. Because this research took place within the school division that employed me, caution was exercised. Additionally, I am a vice-principal in the school division that participants were drawn from. It was important to uphold an awareness that



volunteers for the study may have at one time worked alongside me, and that a supervisory relationship or power imbalance may have been in place. Efforts were made to avoid creating situations where a position of authority could lead to a conflict-of-interest development for either me or participants in the study. To that end, participants were not chosen who currently have, or who have previously had, a supervisory relationship with me.

An important aspect of limiting possible researcher preconception was how the communication was sent to colleagues within the school division. It was too personally direct for the email invitation to participate in the study to come from my email address. A written policy (and associated procedures) applied to ethical considerations required by the school division in which this research took place, and a written application was submitted and approved prior to participants were approached. Following the school division external research requirements, it fell to the principal of each school to determine whether they forwarded the research invitation to their teachers for consideration. It was explained that each school-based principal understands the unique contexts and circumstances of their staff and professional community; therefore, the appeal to teachers did not come directly from me (the researcher) but was a forwarded email from the school principal. The forwarded email served as acknowledgement that the principal understood their staff might choose to apply to participate in the research. As I currently work within the same school division, I did not email the invitation to participate in the study to my own school principal (thereby eliminating that school site and its teachers from participation). In setting up the contact form that solicited submissions from potential participants, I used my institutional email address (University of Lethbridge) as opposed to my professional school-based email address (see Appendix E for the email template sent to site-based principals in the

school division). This explicit choice further separated the study from the day-to-day work of the school division; an important distinction to make.

I am currently a high school vice-principal and am employed by the school board within which this research took place; therefore, collegial relationships toward potential research participants were considered. No teachers who currently work at the same school as I do were considered for the study. The awareness of positional authority must be acknowledged, and it is most ethical to avoid any conflicts of interest or researcher positionality that could develop from interviewing teachers who I worked closely with. Teachers who previously worked alongside me when I was assistant principal of an elementary school within the division were cautiously considered. In all, every effort to select research participants who have not worked at the same school while I was in a position of authority or a site-based administrator, were made. This explicit attempt to mitigate perceptions of researcher positionality and unethical research decisions supported the integrity of the study despite it taking place within the division that I am employed by. A further ethical consideration was made regarding the school division in which the research took place. The name of the school division where the research occurred originally appeared in Appendix E; however, that direct identification has been removed from the final version of this document. In all, using my institutional email address for communication, allowing principals to forward my recruitment email (as they saw fit), employing pseudonyms to identify participants, and avoiding naming the school division in which the research took place, underscored the many ethical considerations made in this study.

If necessary, I implemented a plan to seek support from a neutral third party who would assist in selecting participants who met the criteria outlined, without compromising my positionality in selecting participants. In the context of this study, a neutral third party who could

assist in participant selection was one (or both) of the two thesis co-supervisors overseeing this work. If I received support in selecting participants for the study, the likelihood that a conflict of interest emerged was reduced. Voluntary participants for the research study were selected using an online survey tool (SurveyMonkey) that allowed any screener to determine participant suitability for an interview. A series of short questions were used to determine whether a candidate met the teaching experience requirement (0-5 years, 6-14 years, 15+ years), and availability/time commitment requirements of the study. It was assumed that teachers' disclosures made through the online survey tool were reliable and accurate. Self-reporting was assumed to be completely valid, and no further verification or authentication of these facts took place from the researcher's perspective. As previously mentioned, I gathered responses to the institutional email address (University of Lethbridge) as opposed to school division email. The email inviting teachers to participate in the study was sent from my institutional email address directly to school-based principals in the school division.

As stated earlier, I sought nine teachers to participate in the study: three teachers who were in their first five years of teaching, three teachers with between six and fourteen years of experience, and three "veteran" teachers who had fifteen or more years of teaching experience. As I could not predict who would volunteer to participate in the study, consideration to what constituted the sample size and composition were made in advance. Should only three participants (the minimum required for this study) from each delineated years of experience group volunteer to participate, they would by default make up the participants for this study. Nine teachers (3 from each experience group) were chosen; therefore, should more than three teachers volunteer from within each years of experience group, the neutral third party (mentioned above) were asked to provide support in the selection process. The use of a third party to help

make teacher participant selections (should more than the minimum required participants volunteer for the study) further reduced any negative perception of researcher positionality in this study. It was possible that not enough teachers (minimum of three from each years of experience group) would volunteer to participate in the study. If the minimum required volunteers were not found within the original selection window, the sign-up process would be extended and the call for volunteers would be re-distributed to the potential participants within the school division.

Mitigating potential risks of researcher positionality was an important step in verifying the trustworthiness of this study; it was also key to the phenomenological method to incorporate the bracketing process to identify personal past knowledge that might influence the researcher (Giorgi, 2008). Once the researcher has considered, and articulated (bracketed) such past knowledge, researchers do run the risk of becoming “trapped within their own listings rather than freed from them” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 3). The process of assuming the phenomenological attitude (which includes bracketing) also served to prepare the researcher for analysis in the most scientific way possible within this methodology. According to Giorgi and Giorgi (2010), the researcher brackets “all past knowledge about the phenomenon being researched so that he or she can be freshly present to the current instance of it” (p. 7). The freshness of being current and present within the analysis, combined with an ongoing awareness of bracketed past experiences, leads to a phenomenologically appropriate approach to addressing researcher positionality.

## Chapter Four: Findings

This research study was conducted through interviews with nine participants selected from a mid-sized urban school division in Alberta, Canada. Having had past experiences with inquiry-based professional learning was key to participation in this research project, and each participant brought their unique experiences to the study. A diverse group of participants were selected from a cross-section of teaching experience levels (0-5 years; 6-14 years; and 15+ years). The school division participants were drawn from had an emphasis on inquiry-based professional growth planning and collaborative professional learning. All participants interviewed had multiple years of experience within these areas. The general guiding questions were consistent for each participant interview, although the interview structure allowed for participants to express their individual perspectives and experiences. Each conversational interview followed the same format and began with a review of the informed consent process, an introduction to the study (including a review of professional learning and inquiry) and asking the participant if they had any questions before beginning (see Appendix C for full interview script).

Qualitative data was gathered through nine semi-structured interviews conducted with participants at a mutually agreed upon location (including the option to meet online via TEAMS or ZOOM) and following all COVID-19 pandemic regulations for that time. Participants were selected through a completely voluntary process. Teachers received a forwarded email from the researcher sent via their site-based school leaders; participants chose to respond to an expression of interest to participate in an interview. The interviews ranged in length and duration depending on the participant responses to questions and their availability of time. Each interview was recorded (audio only) and one interview was split into two sessions due to the personal commitments of the participant; all other interviews were completed in one sitting. Transcripts of

each interview were developed from the mp3 audio files through a third-party transcription service converting the audio files to a text document.

The purpose of the study was to use a phenomenological approach to better understand what reveals, or is essential to, the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth. The first stage of data analysis was to compare the audio recordings of each interview to the first draft of interview transcripts developed by the third-party transcription service. Subsequent stages of the data analysis process involved reading through the transcripts to identify cohesive meaning units, creating distinct expressions/statements based on each meaning unit, and then developing a general structure of the phenomenon. Using this process and moving through multiple drafts beginning with each interview transcript, nine distinct individual synopses were created (three from each length of teaching service grouping: 0-5 years; 6-14 years; 15+ years of teaching experience). In the further analysis of the data collected, each individual synopsis was considered within the context of a general condensation alongside the other synopses of participants with similar years of teaching experience. This research yielded nine unique interview transcripts, nine individual case synopses, and three distinct general condensations based on participant self-reported years of teaching experience.

### **Teachers with 0-5 Years of Experience**

A completed individual synopsis for each participant is available to read in the appendices of this study. What follows are summaries of the individual synopses for each of the three participants in this years of experience group. Three participants in their first five years of teaching participated in the research for this study, and these interviews ranged between 54 minutes to one hour in length. All names reported in the following summaries are pseudonyms randomly generated and attributed to each interview participant.

**Kylie Blake: 0-5 years of teaching.** Kylie Blake is a participant in the first five years of her teaching career. She has worked in two school divisions, but in her current school division she has worked at one school. Kylie teaches full-time and has held a variety of types of contracts in her career. A complete individual synopsis of Kylie Blake's interview is also available to read (Appendix F). Because Kylie identifies as a naturally inquisitive person, she feels an affinity toward an inquiry-based approach to professional learning and growth. Kylie explains that inquiry learning comes naturally to her. Factors key to Kylie's success are her personal motivation, drive, determination, and perseverance; she indicates these traits were influential both before and after becoming a teacher. A sense of empathy, process, and creation is present in Kylie's inquiry. Additionally, a strong sense of personal motivation informs Kylie's role as a teacher as well as her strong focus on professional learning and growth.

Inquiry-based processes of professional learning and growth are cyclical and link back to prior learning – they also inform Kylie's future plans for inquiry and teaching. Intentionally engaging in a process of reflection and questioning allows Kylie to ask herself whether or not her current inquiry should continue into the future. Kylie believes inquiry-based professional learning to be very meaningful compared to traditional professional development but admits that an inquiry process may require more work and effort than other methods. Kylie also explains that the inquiry-based process can be confusing at times – it is not black and white, and sometimes teachers feel they have not accomplished what they set out to do. It is not always easy. In Kylie's experience, all of her teacher professional growth plans have been developed through an inquiry-based model; she is early in her career and this process was introduced at her school alongside her first contract there.

Collaborative relationships, opportunities to sharing growth plans and inquiry questions,

and meaningful, ongoing collaboration are all important experiences for Kylie. Professional autonomy, and the opportunity to create communities of teachers through shared inquiry-based learning, strengthen Kylie's personal motivation. Kylie seeks out groups of teachers both in person and online, for the purpose of sharing and collaborating. The COVID-19 pandemic experiences Kylie had motivated her toward finding new online communities of teacher collaborators. In many of her experiences, Kylie's professional collaboration leads to important, ongoing relationships with colleagues.

Due to the collaborative, inquiry-focused nature of staff relationships at her school, Kylie notes that staff inquiry leads to inquiry for students, too. In Kylie's experience, her subject-specific school-based colleagues are extremely collaborative. Kylie uses her inquiry-based framework to test new ideas with her classes and to gather feedback from her students. Sometimes Kylie wonders how to best demonstrate what she has accomplished through her inquiry-based growth planning. Another challenge Kylie experiences is that time for shared collaboration with colleagues is limited; teachers also struggle when they are not moving in the same direction or when they are not on the same level. For some teachers, developing a basic shared language for inquiry processes was an initial hurdle at Kylie's school. Kylie relies on an inquiry-focused growth planning template to record her process and reflect on progress within her inquiry.

In Kylie's experience, when inquiry is driven by teachers themselves, they own their learning; personal autonomy over inquiry is essential to teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth. Through their experiences with inquiry-based professional learning at her school, Kylie explains that teachers become proud of the work they do. In the past, Kylie has experiences where she rewrites her annual inquiry question mid-year when her learning takes a



different direction. Kylie also explains that it is opportunities to risk, to fail, to grow, and to ask questions throughout inquiry-based approaches to professional learning, that influence her life as an educator.

**Charlotte Hayes: 0-5 years of teaching.** In her fifth year of teaching, Charlotte Hayes has worked in three different schools while holding a variety of contract types. Charlotte comes from a family that includes many educators and people who work in education and growing up she always thought she would become a teacher, too. A complete version of the individual synopsis of Charlotte's interview is also available to read (Appendix G). Charlotte insists that when you know better, you want to do better, which aligns with her appreciation for lifelong learning. While still an undergraduate student and pre-service teacher, Charlotte was introduced to inquiry-based methods of professional learning and growth. Using an inquiry-based professional growth plan is the only format Charlotte has experience with, since her current school division began this process in her first year of teaching. Charlotte does not have experience with a more traditional (goal-based; checklist) growth plan document.

In Charlotte's experience, when she is able to authentically use her inquiry questions to frame her learning, this will naturally draw greater investment from her. This process fuels her curiosities. Charlotte finds it difficult to invest in experiences that are prescriptive, externally imposed, and lacking in clear connection to her own inquiry-based learning plan; her investment must be intrinsic. Early in her teaching career, Charlotte had experiences where she did not have full autonomy over her inquiry-based learning, and this led to decreased satisfaction. In some cases, she did not create or write her own inquiry question, and in these instances, she cannot remember what she was supposed to be learning. Over time Charlotte has gained the experience to see that her own thinking and reflection on her teaching experiences allows her to invest

deeply.

The first few years of teaching can be overwhelming and exhausting for young educators. Charlotte explains that the learning curve was very steep in her first year of teaching, and navigating multiple priorities was difficult. At early stages in her career, Charlotte recalls there were so many different things to focus on, which contributed to her feelings that breadth was emphasized over depth of knowledge. These experiences led to Charlotte feeling frustrated and that she was not doing anything well. Charlotte thrives when she can find something, focus on it, and do it well; an inquiry-based process allows Charlotte to prioritize depth of learning over breadth.

Because there have been so many changes to her teaching assignment in the first five years of her career, Charlotte uses the word 'inconsistency' to explain her situation. Each school she has experiences with is very different in its approach to inquiry-based professional learning. Charlotte has diverse experiences from each school site she taught at; she has taught in-person and online, and she has experiences both practicing her inquiry with deeply connected teaching teams, or completely on her own. Some things remain consistent for Charlotte. For example, reflection is essential to her learning. Charlotte reflects on what her experiences have been, where she believes she can grow, and what she knows about the curriculum of her current assignment. Charlotte appreciates opportunities to cycle through learning, growth, and reflection repeatedly. Another consistency for Charlotte is her commitment to generating inquiry questions that meet the needs of her students. Charlotte explains that it is difficult to generate meaningful inquiry without knowing her students well and building relationships first.

Charlotte has experiences collaborating with colleagues from across her school division who have similar interests. These groups of teachers, called collaborative communities, are

beneficial to Charlotte's developing professionally and meeting her own inquiry goals. That being said, during the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration at both school- and division-levels was made difficult. Despite several challenges within her first five years of teaching, Charlotte has acquired important experiences. While teaching online, her experience of inquiry-based learning helped Charlotte gain experience, independence, and confidence. Charlotte has experiences learning to re-prioritize her inquiry efforts, including adding a third inquiry focus, as long as student need is driving her decision. Over time, Charlotte practiced consistently relating her new learning back to her inquiry questions. Her ongoing referral to inquiry-based growth makes Charlotte grateful to the process; she reflects on her learning often. Several years into her career, Charlotte now has a variety of experiences to draw from. With a larger network, and more experience, Charlotte now has the direction, purpose, and questioning that helps her to fulfill her learning goals.

**Alexandra Houghton: 0-5 years of teaching.** Alexandra Houghton, during her first five years of teaching, has taught in a variety of different schools, urban and rural environments, and at different grade levels. Her diversity of experience – and positive childhood memories of time spent in her own mom's classrooms – inform her self-awareness as a teacher today. Despite weathering many changes in her career to-date, Alexandra is grateful to be exactly where she is right now. A fulsome and complete individual synopsis of Alexandra Houghton's interview is also available to read (Appendix H). Colleagues at Alexandra's current school have diverse ideas and interests, and through collaboration, dialogue, and cooperation, they uncover areas of mutual inquiry and learning. Usually organized by grade level teaching teams, staff work together to narrow their scope of inquiry to specific topics or areas of improvement. In Alexandra's experience, collaboration is essential for the inquiry process to be successful.

Alexandra seeks experiences in other teachers' classrooms, and she approaches observations with the goal of bringing elements of their practice into her own classroom.

In Alexandra's experience, some teachers are hesitant to attempt inquiry-based professional growth planning because they are worried about risk-taking, that it will be more work, that it will take more time, or that it will be scary. That being said, Alexandra explains that teachers need the support of colleagues who are willing to take risks alongside them. She also shares her understanding that collaborative, inquiry-based efforts need to be in the core beliefs of the school. At Alexandra's school, teachers will gather on their own time (even after school) to discuss how they are going about their inquiry planning. Time set aside for collaboration is important to Alexandra, but she notes that many priorities arise in school and this collaboration is not always possible. Collaboration throughout her school division, through a collaborative community initiative, is an important experience for Alexandra; she finds it necessary for her engagement and connection to colleagues in similar roles. Alexandra warns that enthusiastic teachers will sometimes overcommit by trying to improve too many areas at once.

Alexandra has experience with more traditional, goal-based and checklist-style professional growth plans; however, her preference is a plan that supports group conversations, brainstorming, hearing other people's perspectives about the process, and discussing what happens during the school year. Alexandra finds an inquiry-based professional growth plan satisfies these needs. An inquiry-based approach to professional growth planning is more creative and open to interpretation for Alexandra. She believes there are many different directions it can go, and that it provides for reflection, adjustment, or continuation at the end of the school year. For Alexandra, only personally relevant topics motivate her inquiry. She warns that when an external focus of learning is prioritized for her, or imposed on her, she does not take

those extra steps to go further with learning more.

Personal engagement is central to Alexandra's creation of her professional growth plans each year. Personally relevant inquiry topics are what give Alexandra the drive to learn more. Alexandra will record information, her thoughts and feelings, and progress on the outcomes of different activities in her classroom. Collecting evidence, observations in her classroom, and active reflection through dialogue with colleagues, motivate Alexandra through her inquiry process. Being able to see inquiry-in-action allows Alexandra a deeper understanding of the process, especially when it comes to using inquiry methods in her classroom. Student perspective, and feedback from the classroom environment, also informs Alexandra's exploration of inquiry within her teaching. Student need is a highly considered factor as she plans her inquiry, too.

Alexandra explains that a substantial part of professional growth planning at her school relies on strong relationships. Additionally, Alexandra describes experiences demonstrating a deep value and appreciation for collaboration, connection, and collegiality across her school division. Diverse experiences during teaching practicum placements and her internship afforded Alexandra the opportunity to form her beliefs about the importance of strong collaboration among colleagues; she seeks connection for the purpose of learning, growth, and mutual support. From her first professional growth plan to her current inquiry-based plans, Alexandra describes the importance being the conversations that take place about what is happening for teachers. Alexandra believes that how teachers collaborate as a staff has an effect on how students collaborate in classrooms; the role that inquiry plays in teacher learning positively influences student learning. Alexandra sees an inquiry process as one that assists in solving problems and facing challenges. Together with her colleagues, they discuss their learning and ways to

collectively improve; they even find common ground. To Alexandra, the role inquiry plays is positive – even if the desired outcome is not achieved, you can always start again, and you will have learned something.

### **Summary of General Condensation: Teachers with 0-5 Years of Experience**

What follows is a summary of the general condensation for participants with this level of teaching experience that was created from the individual synopses of interviews with these three participants. The complete general condensation for participants in this study with 0-5 years of teaching experience is included with the appendices (Appendix O).

In the first few years of teaching, teachers experience multiple priorities to focus on and too many areas of growth lead to a participant feeling they are inadequate in all areas. Enthusiastic beginning participants will overcommit by trying to improve multiple growth areas at once. Inquiry is meaningful, so even if the desired outcome is not achieved, participants can always start again having learned something from the process. Participants have experiences where they rewrite inquiry questions mid-year because their learning has taken a different direction.

Participants are influenced by inquiry-based learning when they join other groups of teachers to share and collaborate. Participants describe events—collaborative communities—within their school division as opportunities for sharing information, working together, and connecting with colleagues. Participants appreciate and value the opportunity to create communities of inquiry-focused learners in their school division. Collaborating with colleagues from across the division with similar interests supports participants in achieving their inquiry goals and developing as professionals.

It is commonly experienced that growth plans and inquiry questions are shared on staff.

Conversations are used to find common ground and uncover areas of mutual inquiry and learning. Through shared inquiry and collaboration, participants get to know their colleagues including how their classrooms work and what motivates them to grow. Participants test out their inquiry learning through practical application in the classroom; participants observe students and consider how to support them in finding success. Participants seek new ways to collaborate and share the results of their professional inquiry. They are excited to pursue inquiry because of these experiences, and they plan to advocate for inquiry-based professional learning in the future.

Participants collaborate within their schools. They do this in structured ways, including developing inquiry questions separately and then coming together to share and discuss. Teacher collaboration is also organized around grade-levels taught or subject-area specializations. Sometimes participants find themselves without anyone who knows what they are going through and experiencing; they may have nobody to reflect with. When participants search for the learning communities they lack, it is because they need support, and they want to keep learning. Collaborative inquiry within a school allows participants to experience collective improvement, seeking common ground, and reflective conversations focused on growth. Sharing inquiry with colleagues allows the group to positively focus its energy on fewer tasks.

Methods of inquiry are used and discussed in reflective conversations with family members, administrators, and colleagues in education. These nurturing relationships allow participants the confidence to grow through challenges in their early careers. Participants also describe learning as a life-long process, and they compare this to the cyclical inquiry process. Continuous reflection and questioning prompts participants to consider whether an inquiry cycle is finished or if it should continue into the future. Participants describe an essential connection between reflection, lifelong learning, successful teaching, and the role of inquiry within their

schools.

Some participants received training in inquiry-based methods and projects while undergraduates and pre-service teachers; these participants are comfortable with inquiry-based growth plans. Depending on when they were hired, some participants began their careers when the school division was starting to implement an inquiry-based process and they use the methods of inquiry-based professional learning to understand that classroom context is everchanging. Inquiry helps participants see that education is a work in progress and nothing is set in stone. Participants revisit their inquiry questions frequently; they are living out the inquiry and continuously attempting growth through it. Inquiry-based approaches are the only ones some beginning participants know, and their professional reflection becomes key to the process. Through inquiry-based professional growth planning, participants reflect back on their guiding questions throughout the school year.

Before they start planning for their current-year inquiry questions, participants reflect on past school years, look to past inquiries for continuing themes, reflect on past experiences, and consider their current teaching assignment for areas of professional growth. Essential to their success are ongoing support with answering their inquiry questions and having a school-based inquiry process in place. Cycles of continuous opportunities to learn, grow, reflect, and repeat, are valuable processes for participants. Participants believe that success with an inquiry-based professional growth plan comes from working together, sharing ideas and information, and collaboration. Although participants value time for collaboration with colleagues, the many shifting priorities in a school can sometimes prevent this meaningful work.

Conditions for collaborative professional learning and inquiry vary from school to school and participants understand that each school is very different in its approach to inquiry-based



professional learning. An unwillingness to take risks, a lack of collaborative opportunities, and a consistently shifting teaching assignment, all limit the success of inquiry-based processes.

Participants have observed situations where, instead of collaborating with one another, teaching teams might find themselves focused on wildly different priorities that did not align. Participants also deeply value conversations and dialogue with colleagues but note that traditional professional growth plans can limit conversations between colleagues within a school. For these participants, a key difference between traditional growth plans and inquiry-based growth plans is the emphasis on the important conversations about what is taking place for them.

There are many positive experiences with inquiry-based professional growth planning at the school level. For some participants this approach is more creative, open to interpretation, and fluid. Professional growth plans that are inquiry-based are more flexible compared to rigid, checklist-based growth plans. Responding to student need is a priority; participants must be flexible enough to shift their inquiry as they get to know and understand their students. It is also important to determine common interests held by students for the purpose of learning and working together as a whole.

Participants are aware of external factors that attempt to influence their professional learning, and they find it difficult to invest in initiatives that are externally imposed. When participants do not have full autonomy over their inquiry planning, they feel less satisfaction in the process. Participants notice that when their colleagues want to learn – and are excited by their learning – they are more likely to care about their work and invest in doing the best job they can. Seeing inquiry-in-action leads to deeper understanding of the process, reflection on using inquiry methods in situ, seeking engagement, asking questions, and imaging change within the classroom environment.

Participants connect deeply with their inquiry-based professional growth when the conditions foster personal initiative, engagement, alignment to inquiry questions, and the autonomy to inquire, make choices, and seek opportunities aligned to their own learning. Under these conditions, participants care more about the outcomes, they find a deeper personal investment, and the process feeds their curiosities. Inquiring participants own their learning; what they find personally relevant drives them to learn more, reflect, actively think, invest deeply, and relate their inquiry back to their own teaching experiences. Additionally, there is a connection between teacher professional inquiry and the ways teachers approach student learning; teacher learning and growth connects to student learning and growth. Conversations with colleagues, and school administrators, are important. These discussions are appreciated, and they lead to participants feeling rewarded when they receive feedback about their growth.

### **Teachers with 6-14 Years of Experience**

The complete individual synopsis for each participant is available to read in the appendices of this study. What follows are summaries of the individual synopses for each of the three participants in this years of experience group. Three participants in years 6-14 of teaching participated in the research for this study and these three interviews ranged between 49 and 53 minutes in length. All names reported in the following summaries are pseudonyms randomly generated and attributed to each interview participant.

**George Gardner: 6-14 years of teaching.** George Gardner has taught multiple grade levels in several different school divisions and in more than one Canadian province. George has held a variety of types of teaching contracts, and his assignments have included classroom teaching and several other specialized teaching positions throughout his fourteen-year career in education. A complete individual synopsis of George Gardner's interview is also available to

read (Appendix I). George has experiences working with colleagues to plan and collaborate - always taking student needs into account. George is optimistic when he thinks about the sharing of growth plans to drive collaboration with more colleagues. George does see a lot of value in collaborative professional learning, especially when it is inquiry-based in nature.

For George, a Teacher Professional Growth Plan (TPGP) is a formality; it can be beneficial at times, and a hindrance at other times. Before he commits to his inquiry growth plan, it is important that George knows who will be in his class, what the student needs are, and what the class composition will be like. George has come to appreciate the need to build a toolbox, reflect on past students, and consider past strategies that were successful. George refers to an inquiry-based professional growth planning template developed at the local university; this planning tool does a good job of helping create accountability for teachers.

At the end of the day, George asks himself what his role was in that experience, and how can he do better. George's motivation toward inquiry is internal; wherever he works, inquiry will continue to drive his practice. In the past, access to knowledgeable experts would have assisted George in developing his professional practice through inquiry. George finds it difficult to find high quality resources and believes that when a teacher is not an expert in a particular area, experts can help. Inquiry-based professional learning can be overwhelming for participants, and in the past George has been overwhelmed by the process, especially when undertaking large projects with limited resources. According to George, inquiry is necessary during those moments or school years when a teacher undertakes a big issue, because "it's good to put a plan to it." George describes inquiry processes as cyclical: theory, practice, reflection, etc.

Throughout his career, positive relationships have also been important to George. George, who works in a fairly solitary environment, finds it difficult to find opportunities to

collaborate with colleagues. Even within specialized teaching roles like his, George sees each situation as unique wherein all student dynamics are different. George wonders if other teachers in specialized positions like him also feel limited in their collaboration opportunities.

In previous positions George had far fewer opportunities for professional learning and those opportunities were far more prescribed, too. When joining his current division, with its emphasis on an inquiry model, George noticed a big shift. At this point in his career, George finds that most general workshops are too surface level to meet his learning needs. George also believes it is difficult to use an inquiry model with traditional professional development activities. George explains that “even in situations where I’ve been in groups in inquiry-based learning, where perhaps I haven’t found the meaning that I once did, I think it still goes beyond what you can do in that kind of prescribed model.”

George finds connection, meaning, and purpose within his diverse life experiences. He uses inquiry both professionally and personally. George takes responsibility to support his students. When he needs to do something to help them, and he struggles to find the guidance he needs, he will seek it himself. George explains that “I’ve always used inquiry-based to fill my gaps, because at the end of the day, I need to look in the mirror and say, ‘Am I doing everything I can to meet my student’s needs?’”

George sees ways that inquiry can be supported and sustained. He believes that stronger connections with outside professionals would assist teachers with their inquiry. George would also like to foster relationships with people in other school divisions who do similar work as him. George insists that time (as in, not enough time) will always be a barrier to collaboration. Working on his inquiry-based growth plan before students return to school after summer is hard for him. In his division there are several professional learning days amassed into one week in

October and he finds this is still early in the school year to have identified all the needs in his classroom – it limits his time to inquire later in the year. Dialogue with his administrators about his inquiry-based growth plan brings a lot of value to the process; unfortunately, the interviews get minimized, not emphasized, or not prioritized in his experience. First-year participants, as opposed to those veteran participants with more experience, are more likely to be overwhelmed by approaching new inquiry tasks.

To George, prescriptive professional development activities assume a one-size fits all approach will answer all questions and fill all learning needs in a school. To focus efforts and seek collaborators for his inquiry, George has developed a collaborative community within his school division. George formed the group and they received additional collaboration time from the division. George believes teachers require the “autonomy to do something that’s meaningful to them,” and that “as professionals...we deserve that autonomy to find out...search out on our own.” Professionally questioning, through the inquiry process, is meaningful to George. He explains that “once you stop asking those questions, I think you become stagnant as a professional, as a person.”

**Anthony Hall: 6-14 years of teaching.** Over the course of fourteen years of teaching, Anthony Hall has taught students at multiple grade levels, and held various contract types in two school divisions. Anthony pursued a master’s degree through a distance learning program while in his first five years of teaching. One thing Anthony appreciates about his career to-date is the breadth of experiences within his teaching assignments. A complete individual synopsis of Anthony’s interview is available in the appendix (Appendix J).

Four years ago, Anthony moved from another school division to his present division. Within his new position, inquiry-based methods and growth plans were coming to the forefront.

Last school year, the staff at Anthony's school were asked to create their own professional learning questions. These were submitted to a spreadsheet and then shared. Anthony enjoyed this process. Anthony feels the setting was right to provide teachers with a colleague who had similar interests, and he believes this experience propelled his professional learning forward.

In Anthony's school division, a growth planning template (developed at the local university) is used as a guide or template. At his school there are two learning goals; one goal belongs solely to the teacher, and the other goal is determined with your school learning cohort for that year. Anthony's professional inquiry cohort is comprised of his subject specialization ("department") colleagues, and they created one inquiry question together. Meeting as a cohort was challenging. Their first meetings were during a professional learning week in October, and ongoing scheduling conflicts for the team prevented ongoing connection.

For several years, Anthony served on a provincially guided panel tasked with developing the framework for curriculum redesign. This opportunity came at the same time as his introduction to inquiry-based learning as a professional growth planning. Going through that process—returning year after year to the curriculum working group—supported Anthony's understanding of how to create guiding questions for inquiry. It helped him to see the importance of inquiry, and the use of guiding questions, in his own professional learning. These curriculum discussions helped Anthony understand why you can't have too many guiding questions; you overload yourself with too much inquiry. Anthony states, "if you have too much inquiry, you don't really get anywhere."

Anthony believes that in the twenty-first century, education is moving from concrete to conceptual understandings – inquiry questions are more concept-based than concrete. To Anthony, there is a connection between conceptual understandings, critical thinking, and

learning how to answer questions that perhaps cannot be answered. Through an understanding of inquiry and guiding questions, Anthony sees the education system moving teachers toward the direction of asking those questions “that we will then be spending the rest of our lives trying to answer.”

Front of mind for Anthony are important areas of inquiry related to the COVID-19 pandemic and education. He wonders what a post-COVID-19 classroom will look like, and he is curious about the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed work/life balance for him. Online collaboration has been meaningful and inquiry-focused for Anthony. He is a member of multiple groups of educators on Facebook who are dedicated to pursuing areas of mutual importance for professional learning. One Facebook group he joined “is one of the most effective professional learning groups, just by nature of the person who created it, and his ongoing pursuit of inquiry and learning.” In another group Anthony joined, the creator frequently posts inquiry questions into the feed, and it functions like a discussion board.

Anthony is familiar with a guide for teacher professional learning that was developed by researchers at his local university; when he thinks of inquiry, he is drawn to this guide, and it is a tool that he uses each year. Anthony reflects on the relationship between professional learning and traditional professional development. Before he attends a professional development conference, Anthony will consider what he hopes to gain from the experience. Anthony has also frequently used his professional learning to explore how to strengthen relationships.

When Anthony first started teaching, his teacher professional growth plans were goal-based. Instead of writing two inquiry questions, Anthony created two goals. Anthony describes this process as an evolution; what he creates now is an inquiry allowing him to ask, “Where do you think your focus should be, and why, and what are you going to do to explore this?” For

Anthony, it is harder to write a question than it is to create a goal. Thee guiding template he uses each year helps him to focus and direct his thinking to create inquiry questions related to teaching competencies.

Anthony struggled in his first five or six years of teaching, and he believes this was part of the stress of being new to the profession. He described the entire process as a “years-long inquiry, that I was asking myself, what is going on here and why is this so hard?” Anthony also attributes this to a maturation process. Personal development, growth, and relationships are important to Anthony. At this challenging turning point early in his career, Anthony reached out to a trusted friend and colleague with a similar teaching position for advice.

Part of Anthony’s personal inquiry includes his own personal goalsetting, reflection, and questioning. The inquiry-based questions that Anthony asks himself in his personal planning lead toward his personal growth. He creates and writes these personal goals, and he revisits them throughout the year. According to Anthony, as time goes on people will make better inquiries. These inquiries will be fuelled by better questions that will help build, focus, and direct the actions propelling toward where meaningful professional learning should be.

**Lydia Fox: 6-14 years of teaching.** Lydia Fox has many diverse experiences in education. From international teaching practicum placements, to teaching in adult learning post-secondary programs, Lydia has broad perspectives to draw from. Lydia has taught in private schools, magnet catchment schools, and public schools serving mixed socioeconomic families with diverse backgrounds. Over fourteen years of teaching, Lydia has held continuing, full-time contracts throughout her career. A full individual synopsis based on Lydia’s interview can be found in the appendix (Appendix K).

Lydia’s experiences teaching in both community education programs, and at a post-



secondary level, were very inquiry-focused due to the different levels of learners she was instructing. Lydia sees a great deal of inquiry-based learning on a day-to-day basis that goes unnoticed as inquiry; she suspects it's just thinking. Lydia currently teaches through a philosophy that is very inquiry- and curiosity-based; it incorporates exploration and a student-centred approach to learning.

Lydia has found success with her inquiry-based collaboration opportunities. She explained that while working with a collaborative team you have important conversations about what was successful and what did not work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lydia's grade level team collectively worked on a focus question internally, but they also collaborated with a partner grade level team from another school. At Lydia's school, the staff discussed their inquiry-based questions during staff meetings. They were able to reflect, discuss as team and a school, and became involved in the inquiry-based questions of their school leadership team. On Lydia's teaching team, they have the odd moment to discuss inquiry together during a staff meeting, but mostly it's during collaborative time that is set aside on professional development days. At these times they discuss what's been effective, what hasn't been effective, and they talk about new ideas. Lydia believes an initiative in her school division, called collaborative communities, is another way to focus on inquiry-based learning.

A desire for more time to collaborate is important to Lydia. She explains that "we never have enough time to just sit and reflect about our practice or to have a moment to talk to our colleagues." The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the pressure on collaborative time. Lydia remarks that the COVID-19 pandemic removed opportunities and moments of contact with colleagues. Lydia insists that participants should be reflecting more often. To Lydia, having a negative approach to teaching, or a sense of self-doubt and negative self-talk, can be barriers to

success with inquiry-based professional learning.

Teacher autonomy and diversity are important. Lydia resists prescriptive teaching and learning environments and she explains “there is some level of autonomy that you want to bring your authentic self to a classroom every day and you want to bring your best version of you.” Through Lydia’s inquiry and reflection, she finds success with experimentation. After trying something new in her classroom, she explains the “level of curiosity for me went from yeah, what should I do here, how should I explore this to now being able to use it as a universal strategy within my classroom.” Lydia believes that when learning comes through personal experiences or a personal connection, it becomes far more meaningful.

Lydia describes herself as a person who has always been curious and wanting to learn. The inquiry-based approaches she pursues in her own life, especially as a mother, allow Lydia to be a more effective teacher, too. According to Lydia, “every experience is a new experience, and you have to make the best of what you have.” Lydia explains that her approach to teaching may not be the same way a colleague teaches the same concept; she says, “it doesn’t mean it’s wrong, it just can be different and that’s okay.” As she considers inquiry and her role as a teacher, Lydia explains that we are always still learning and growing, but that inquiry changes throughout every year.

Lydia believes she may have been inquiring throughout her career, but that the concept of formal inquiry-based learning is one that is new to her. For the past two or three years the focus of her school division has been inquiry-based questions, focused on a topic, within teams of teachers. During the same period of time at Lydia’s school, the school-wide inquiry process has taken shape around the school leadership team and their specific inquiry-based questions.

Lydia seeks ways to understand how students learn best, and she will ask herself how to teach effectively when so much information comes from a textbook. Lydia believes strongly there is a connection between being an inquiry-based learner and an inquiry-based teacher. In Lydia's experience, inquiry-based methods have always been beneficial. She explains that "every experience whether it would be positive, negative, or just neutral, it's still an experience that you can reflect on and either improve or know that it wasn't successful, and you can try something different."

To Lydia, each new situation deserves an opportunity to reflect on what worked and what did not work. She emphasizes the value of asking reflective questions for the purpose of growth. Lydia believes in her own continuous learning, and she believes in having reflective conversations whenever she can. Lydia was not very reflective at the start of her teaching practice, compared to where she is now. Lydia believes that as teachers, we always try to improve; however, she worries that when teachers spread themselves too thin, it becomes hard to improve in even one area of growth.

More traditional professional growth plans from the past, and her new inquiry-focused plans, have always been somewhat similar for Lydia. The last few years of her career, Lydia has been more inquiry-focused whereas in the past she describes having less direction. Each year Lydia's focus for inquiry is different and she explains this is because it depends on the classroom, the types of learners she has, and the class composition. After being in the classroom for a while each year, Lydia becomes surer of her focus for inquiry.

### **Summary of General Condensation: Teachers with 6-14 Years of Experience**

The following is a summary of the general condensation for participants with the next level of teaching experience. It was created from the individual synopses of interviews with three

participants between six and fourteen years of teaching experience. The complete general condensation for participants participating in this study with 6-14 years of teaching experience is included in the appendix (Appendix P).

Participants recall their early years of teaching. They share experiences connected to the stress of being new to the profession, the need for supportive collegial mentorship, and growing pains through the maturation process of the first five years of teaching. First-year participants, and participants early in their careers, have a lot on the go. These participants who are new to the profession are more likely to be overwhelmed by approaching new inquiry tasks than their veteran colleagues with more experience. Participants believe they should be reflecting more often; however, they understand opportunities for meaningful reflection and personal questioning are limited by time.

Over the course of their careers to-date, participants notice shifts in growth plans and professional learning. Professional growth plans have evolved from being goal-based to inquiry-based. Participants note the difficulty in using an inquiry model within traditional professional development activities, and that even in situations where collaborative inquiry has not been entirely meaningful, it still goes beyond the limits of more prescriptive learning models. Participants' early experiences in their careers (and in different school divisions and provinces), had little or no focus on inquiry-based professional learning. Exposure to inquiry-based methods of professional growth and learning have increased in recent years for participants.

The experiences participants have shape them professionally and influence their future inquiry. Within their school division, participants use a growth planning template (developed at a local university) as a guide and template. Participants describe this tool as helpful in creating accountability, guiding inquiry question development, and focusing reflection on the teaching

competencies. Discussion of inquiry-based professional growth plans, through dialogue with administrators, also brings a lot of value to the process; unfortunately, participants explain that these conversations with school leaders are not emphasized as much as would be helpful.

Sometimes participants can become overwhelmed and unsure about where to start with inquiry, and sometimes they start in the wrong spot. A challenging situation is when there are few people who can relate to what participants are experiencing and what they are going through. Some participants wonder what their post-COVID-19 classroom will look like, and they are curious about how the COVID-19 pandemic will change work/life balance for participants. Other participants express how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pressure on collaborative time. Opportunities to connect with colleagues was reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants see deep value in collaborative professional learning, especially when it is inquiry-based in nature. While working in a collaborative team, participants have important conversations about what is successful and what does not work. Participants enjoy the process of “talking shop,” and sometimes observing one another teach. Participants need opportunities to challenge themselves in their own ways while still having access to collaborative approaches, a sense of team, and a trusted colleague to talk to and connect with. Within their schools, participants experience connections with colleagues who share similar interests, and these collaborations propel professional learning forward. Some participants find success with online collaboration. Connecting with teachers in an online community can be meaningful and inquiry-focused, especially when creators use inquiry-based questioning and prompting to motivate participants in these virtual spaces.

An important element of the inquiry process for participants is that it can be personal – this includes goalsetting, reflection, and questioning. Participants explain that learning comes

through personal experiences and personal connections because this makes learning meaningful. Participants reflect on using inquiry methods to improve themselves, their professional lives, and their relationships. Reflection on inquiry is a common theme for participants, and they view inquiry as an important aspect of their professional lives. Participants emphasize the need to make the best of what each experience brings. Inquiry is central to the work participants do in professional learning and growth – the inquiry question is at the heart of their learning, and everything leads back to that.

Participants explain that inquiry is a tool that is relevant both professionally and personally; they describe having personalities that are curious and focused on continuous learning and growth. There is a strong connection between being an inquiry-based learner and being an inquiry-based teacher. True, effective inquiry questions are never really answered, although they can be fulfilled in many ways. Inquiry is explained as cyclical: incorporating theory, practice, reflection, and revision based on experience. Inquiry-based methods are beneficial whether positive, negative, or neutral; they are experiences for reflection and improvement. When methods are not successful, participants can try something different.

It is common for participants to inquire about what they will take away from an experience before it takes place, and each new situation deserves an opportunity to reflect on what worked and what did not. Inquiry drives careers by prompting participants to consider what they need in the moment to be the best teacher they can be, and to consider what takeaways they hope to gain from professional learning experiences. After being in the classroom for a while at the start of the year, participants become surer of their inquiry focus. Annual inquiry goals shift and are influenced by class composition, student needs, and the types of learners present in the classroom. Before committing to an inquiry growth plan, participants want to get to know their

students.

Participants have experiences working with colleagues to plan and collaborate. They reflect, discuss as a team and a school, and they are also involved in the inquiry-based question developed by school-based leadership teams. Over the past several years, school-wide inquiry has been facilitated through the questions that school leaders hope to achieve as a focus for the learning community. A guiding focus is taking student needs into account and reflecting on better meeting the needs of all students through participants' collaborative efforts. Learning cohorts are created through this sharing when participants with similar inquiry questions seek out colleagues for collaboration. Participants are optimistic when considering the sharing of professional growth plans for the purpose of collaborating with their colleagues. A lack of time will always be a barrier to teacher collaboration.

While participant inquiry can change every year, the expectation for consistent growing and learning for participants remains constant. Professional questioning, through the inquiry process, is important; participants warn of becoming stagnant as a person and a professional once the questioning stops. When a collaborative inquiry project becomes too large to manage on top of classroom responsibilities and personal inquiry, collaborative inquiry becomes unmanageable. Participants acknowledge that trying to engage in deep research and learning while teaching full-time is occasionally difficult and even overwhelming.

Inquiry can take a personal approach – and a professional approach – as participants consider making meaning of their inquiry processes and examining the ways they inquire. Teacher autonomy and diversity are important. In schools, participants are asked to create at least one professional learning question that is uniquely their own. Participants emphasize that as professionals, they deserve the autonomy to seek out learning, and to discover the answers to

inquiry, on their own terms. To make it more valuable, one suggestion is that teachers require autonomy to inquire in ways that are personally meaningful, and then bring that inquiry back to the group. Personal development, growth, and relationships are important to participants. Throughout their careers participants value positive relationships, explaining that these experiences carry them through different challenges.

### **Teachers with 15+ Years of Experience**

The complete individual synopsis for each participant is available to read in the appendices of this study. What follows are summaries of the individual synopses for each of the three participants in this years of experience group. Three participants with 15 or more years of teaching participated in the research for this study and these three interviews ranged between 49 and 65 minutes in length. All names reported in the following summaries are pseudonyms randomly generated and attributed to each interview participant.

**Nathan Hudson: 15 or more years of teaching.** With over 17 years of teaching experience, Nathan Hudson came to his career with a diverse academic experience in post-secondary. Nathan also holds a professional designation outside of his education career and left the profession for several years to work in the private sector. As a teacher, Nathan's experiences in schools include working at multiple different grade levels, and in diverse configurations of schools within broadly different communities and socioeconomic factors influencing children and families. A completed individual synopsis reflecting Nathan's experiences of inquiry and professional learning and growth can be found in the appendix (Appendix L).

Nathan engages in the inquiry process through his school division, and he quite likes it. Inquiry guides Nathan's philosophy of education, but it steers him toward feeling disillusioned at times. Being at this stage of his career, and in his current role for eight years, Nathan believes his



inquiry question to be different than those of his colleagues. To Nathan, a theme is that inquiry in his professional life has led him to join, and create, community.

Although Nathan finds it nice to discuss his inquiry question with other people in the school division, he does not have many deep learning experiences with collaborating across the division – it has been hit or miss for him. Nathan appreciates connecting with colleagues through an inquiry-based approach either formally or informally. Through conversation, he finds he can examine his inquiry question and access a layer of it that he did not previously consider. In the past, Nathan’s inquiry started with accessing his peers and colleagues, and then expanded to selecting conferences and other professional learning.

In his second year of teaching Nathan encountered a difficult pedagogical challenge. Through an inquiry-based approach, he started asking questions of himself and others to seek advice and strategies. Inquiry led Nathan to conferences and finding more people who are deep thinkers on the same subjects and topics that he is. For Nathan, experts had a role to play in his development – there was important information they had, and he needed, in order to make sense of things. In his first three years or so years of teaching, Nathan believes a goal-based approach to his growth plan was still really effective.

An inquiry-based professional growth model was introduced to Nathan’s school around three or four years ago. At the time, a planning guide or template was shared with the teaching staff, and they began learning an inquiry-based version of their annual professional growth plans. At Nathan’s school, time was given to meet with colleagues in groups of two, taking turns listening as they talked about their inquiry questions. The cycle of listening and reflection was designed and shared to assist in getting to a deeper level of their inquiry. In terms of his school-based colleagues, he thinks some people struggle with the process.

Nathan finds it can be frustrating working with colleagues who do not engage in the inquiry process. Based on what Nathan observes in his school, he thinks a lot of professional practice is driven by contexts such as personal anxieties, insecurities, worries about “somebody’s looking over my shoulder,” and the potential for criticism. Another challenge to inquiry-based learning is giving too much credence to the words of so-called experts. Nathan firmly believes he would derive a great benefit from having dedicated time to be heard, reflect, and share with a trusted colleague each week.

Nathan works within a team of people at his school, and they collaborate to develop an inquiry question. He feels that his team was just starting to implement some new ideas related to their inquiry when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Nathan finds that when his team can work through their inquiry, it allows them to step aside from the day-to-day stressors of the school environment. The focus on inquiry allows them to remain “centered and grounded.” When they meet, Nathan describes experiences where they move their inquiry from theory into action while learning from it. Nathan is part of another group – a collaborative community – comprised of teachers in similar positions from across the division. When this group meets to collaborate, they explore an inquiry-based question together that makes sense based on their positions and circumstances. During phases of formal reflection – on professional development days, for example – the inquiry team will analyze how they are progressing and discuss the next phases of their inquiry.

As inquiry-based practices grew in his division, Nathan remembers feeling excited about increasing teacher autonomy over professional learning. Recent experiences with professional learning that did not rely on inquiry fell flat for Nathan. Inquiry-based learning experiences draw Nathan to new communities of learners. Becoming part of new learning communities prompts

Nathan to feel a responsibility toward those individuals, and that community, and he describes honoring the lens through which they collectively view their learning.

Nathan's professional growth plan has always been inquiry-based, despite working in other divisions where the expectation was to complete a list of goals. The longer he works in education, the less goal-oriented processes are important to Nathan; he finds they hold him back personally. In his school division, the inquiry growth plan process is systematized through a template, or guiding document, that participants use. For Nathan, inquiry means developing a question that he would like to explore – he is not actually trying to answer the question but explore it.

From Nathan's perspective, connections to inquiry are present in his whole life. Nathan thinks perhaps his brain is naturally inquiry-based since he asks questions all the time and is constantly seeking answers. Nathan loves inquiry because he gets to learn from a lot of people; to him, the more experience he has, the more inquiry is important in his life. Nathan explains his experience that inquiry "creates kind of a fluency in life where things actually are connected to one another...It all becomes this one kind of thing even though they all appear different."

Nathan says that he has a lot of different questions than a newer participant might have. The longer he goes through his career, Nathan believes his reliance on experts reduces more and more. It is a rare occasion for Nathan to "hear something that hasn't been said before by somebody else. Or that I haven't discovered in the classroom already." Inquiry helps Nathan consider the nature of learning, and this understanding has grown for Nathan over the course of his career and through his inquiry.

**Amy Willis: 15 or more years of teaching.** Amy Willis has held several different contract types during her career, all of them full-time, with more than one school division.

Although Amy has been teaching for nearly two decades, she also had a career in another field before pursuing her degree in education and becoming a teacher. Amy's professional experiences both in and outside of teaching have brought her to some very specialized teaching positions that support students with complex needs at various different grade levels. The full individual synopsis based on Amy's interview is available to read in the appendix (Appendix M).

She describes her life as a process of questioning, and sometimes going down roads that lead to nowhere. Amy pursues paths toward more inquiry because she is interested in it. Amy believes in inquiry-based learning, and she insists that inquiry works if "you are an individual that loves to question, if you're an individual that loves inquiry and loves to gain knowledge in different areas and finds that fascinating and exciting." Amy believes that anytime a teacher can have autonomy, they can make their inquiry suit their passion and what they are striving for. Amy appreciates the opportunity, at events like teachers' convention, to pick and choose what sessions to pursue according to her own inquiry.

Amy describes past experiences with division-wide professional development where she was told where to go, what to do, and how to do it. She admits that it is hard to have someone tell you what you need to learn within a traditional professional development sense. When Amy thinks of goals-based planning and professional development she thinks, "one shot deal, do it or don't. Implement it, don't implement it." Amy explains that when professional development is made mandatory, she knows it will be okay because they are learning together. Because of her experience with inquiry, she can still see professional development as helpful; she explains that "it kind of gives you another opportunity that maybe you wouldn't look at."

In Amy's experience, collaboration centres on working with teachers to support student learning, skill transfer, and transitioning between different learning environments. Sharing of

information, encouraging dialogue and discussion, and proposing ways to do the work collaboratively, are all ways that Amy encourages participation with teacher colleagues. Amy spends a lot of time in that mode of collaboration, which she describes as being action oriented.

Amy also has experiences working with colleagues from other school sites. These meetings include sharing their paths, and sometimes taking ideas from each other. She finds the need is always to inquire, ask questions, and focus on what is best for students. Collaborating with professionals from other schools leads Amy to seek reciprocal beneficial sharing of knowledge and information, and co-teaching of new content. To broaden collaboration, Amy's team has sought opportunities to view other school sites and educational settings.

At the start of Amy's career, she explains that "inquiry was all we did." Amy acknowledges that all members of the learning team bring their own unique perspectives and perceptions. This is another reason why she appreciates inquiry – each person can bring their unique experiences and contribute to the inquiry process. Amy explains that within an inquiry-focused process, "you can go back and forth, and you can change [your methods], and you can do so much change within it without losing sight of what you're aiming for."

In Amy's early experiences with professional growth plans, she explains a straightforward process of writing multiple goals, adding strategies, and listing the people who would help her. There was an evaluation step, a couple of reflection questions, and space to write a few paragraphs, lists, or point-form notes. To Amy, goals are more definitive. Amy explains that inquiry allows for room to grow and for consistent evaluation through check-in points. The checking-in is embedded in the process for Amy, and she understands that inquiry takes work through action and continuous effort.

Amy admits that inquiry can be fairly broad; however, she explains that teachers can select their avenues and approaches toward their inquiry. In Amy's school division, there is a guide or template that is offered to support inquiry-based professional growth plans. For Amy, the layout of the guiding template is nice because it supports the questioning within inquiry and allows a teacher to consider the strategies they will use in their inquiry. Amy explains there are many different ways to go about inquiry, but when you inquire you learn a great deal.

In Amy's experience of starting and growing educational programs, inquiry has always been helpful. Sharing information with others has led to their own programs growing, and Amy shares experiences of reciprocal sharing of ideas, resources, and questions. Amy appreciates sharing with others; she is willing to share her expertise so that teachers can take that experience to build upon it to meet their own needs. Amy explains that her current team and their inquiry hopes were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She says they would be continuing with their focus had the COVID-19 pandemic not interrupted.

Teachers are busy people, and Amy insists that teachers have multiple priorities beyond their own inquiry. She explains that these conflicting priorities "can sometimes overshadow their passion for what they want to do, because they're things that they need to do in order for the day to go a certain way." These participants have things that continuously bombard them in a typical school setting. Amy reinforces the understanding "that inquiry can become difficult for those that everyday responsibilities of a school may take over."

To Amy, inquiry is not always about gaining knowledge. She admits to not being as stuck, enjoying a process that is less rigid, and not as clear-cut. That being said, Amy warns that inquiry can be overwhelming. She says that if there is inquiry, and only inquiry, people may end up all over the place. Amy wonders how, without inquiry, an individual moves forward with

action? She wonders how individuals guide their action without inquiry-based practices? Within traditional professional development, Amy explains that sometimes the learning can be too specific. When Amy thinks about inquiry she thinks about growth, about process, the ability to change directions or speed, and a little bit of a continuum of learning. Amy appreciates inquiry and finds its beauty in the fact that there is not really a right or wrong, which she loves.

**Rosalie Baxter: 15 or more years of teaching.** Rosalie Baxter has been teaching at her current school for five years. Before that, she taught at one school for just over 11 years, and prior to that she held short-term teaching contracts for several years, too. After she completed her teaching degree, but before she started teaching in a school, Rosalie raised her children and was an educator for a community organization for over nine years. In her career she has held various different contract types and has worked both full- and part-time. A fulsome and complete individual synopsis of Rosalie’s interview can be found in the appendix (Appendix N).

In Rosalie’s school division she has access to collaborative communities, which she loves, to connect to educators in similar situations. On Rosalie’s teaching team they collaborate on their professional growth question. It is the same for all three educators on the team. These three teachers create a collaborative community based on their question, and they bring together like-minded people interested in the same inquiry topics. Rosalie appreciates the availability of technology for the purpose of remaining connected to other educators throughout the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Admitting that learning new technology can be overwhelming sometimes, Rosalie also celebrates that she learned many new things during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rosalie describes a high frequency of learning opportunities available are “sit and get, like you just sit, you listen, they tell you, you take your notes, you go away.” In another light, Rosalie explains that much of what is available or on offer today is what she already experienced

15 or more years ago. One benefit of attending professional development events are the opportunities to connect with teachers from other divisions. During Rosalie's career, she feels like there has been a shift in her experiences from more traditional professional development toward a model of teacher professional learning. She explains the types of learning experiences that actively engage teachers are more common in professional learning now than they were ten years ago.

A major barrier to inquiry, according to Rosalie is when teachers are put in a situation where they are told what their inquiry question will be. When teachers are told what to investigate, she believes they are "not going to get a whole lot out of it." Another barrier to meaningful inquiry is when teachers try to make inquiry fit a pre-determined program. For Rosalie, forced groupings lead to challenges for teacher inquiry. Asking educators to inquire as teams based on their teaching assignment, as opposed to their mutual shared interests, is less effective. Time for inquiry and collaboration is another obstacle Rosalie describes. Rosalie also mentions access to resources as a challenge when it comes to inquiry-based professional learning. Although Rosalie loves collaborative communities in her school division, she believes there is not enough time set aside for them.

At her school, inquiry-based professional learning takes place for teachers during staff meetings. When it comes to inquiry questions, teams of teachers choose their questions and work together. Rosalie first thought meeting each month would be too much; now she believes if they did not meet regularly, the inquiry would "be easy to shelve." During their meetings, the inquiry teams at her school discuss their questions, discuss their progress so far, what challenges the face, what barriers they encounter, what opportunities they have, and how school leadership can help.



Rosalie describes herself as naturally curious and she believes in inquiry; she thinks inquiry is one of the better ways to improve practice and engage in professional learning. She describes not having many opportunities to attend professional learning events during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of her own personal inquiry, Rosalie admits this is usually driven by her feelings of not meeting teaching standards, or areas of her own perceived professional weakness. That being said, she explains her love for working in groups and her natural tendency is toward collaboration...it is her favourite way to learn.

In order for the inquiry process to be successful, Rosalie insists that you have to be invested. To Rosalie, autonomy over inquiry questions leads to a sense of commitment and being truly interested in the inquiry. Inquiry-based opportunities lead to feeling more connected to the subject matter, digging deeper, understanding the concept better, and feeling excited to try new things. Engagement comes for Rosalie when she is challenged with a task or problem. Spending time to discuss her learning with colleagues engages her, too.

Rosalie believes that teachers constantly use reflection and inquiry routines to question how to meet student needs, to discover what learning is missing, and to assist the students in their understanding. Before she inquires formally, Rosalie looks at her own practice and determines where she feels she is lacking or needing to support herself more. Because of her inquiry process, Rosalie explains that her inquiry question is in her head more often, and she finds herself observing her students to see if she is getting data back on the extent to which her inquiry is improving the classroom environment. Rosalie describes her inquiry being a lot of trial, error, and reflection; she acknowledges that some days something goes wrong, and other days it feels like the best lesson ever. She feels the reflection process makes her a better teacher.

Careful to indicate that her past professional growth plans were still authentic, Rosalie

admits they were perhaps less authentic than her current inquiry-based professional growth plans. Rosalie describes a familiar scenario: writing a growth plan in the fall, visiting with administration, shelving the plan for the year, and finally pulling it off the shelf in June for the final review meeting with an administrator. She also believes that using an inquiry-based format keeps the learning more current and front-of-mind. Presently, Rosalie considers how to manage her inquiry within the classroom, she considers what data she is receiving from the students, and she wonders about making learning more authentic in order to support student thinking and wondering.

According to Rosalie, teachers naturally inquire. In her past experiences outside of teaching, Rosalie used inquiry methods to research and plan. Rosalie believes that inquiry always has a positive outcome in some way. She also believes that even if she questions the outcome of inquiry for another teacher, she can acknowledge teacher autonomy when “that might work for you, but it’s not, it just doesn’t feel right for me.” Rosalie is open to making mistakes within her inquiry. That being said, for her inquiry to be effective, Rosalie needs to be in a safe environment, feel supported, and feel safe to make mistakes.

### **Summary of General Condensation: Teachers with 15+ Years of Experience**

Below is a summary of the general condensation for participants participating in this study with 15 or more years of teaching experience. This summary was written based on the completed general condensation of these participants, and it is available in the appendix of this study (Appendix Q).

Inquiry helps participants consider the nature of learning, which is a process that develops over the course of a career. Learning is always good thing, and asking questions is always a good thing – participants wonder if we should ask more questions. Some participants

explain how their natural tendency is toward collaboration, and that this is their favourite way to learn. Some participants believe that inquiry always has a positive outcome in some way, despite other professional learning opportunities also being positive. When the learning team can work through their inquiry it allows them to step aside from the daily stressors of the school environment to focus on something else entirely.

Inquiring for teachers can start with accessing peers and colleagues for support, and then expanding to selecting conferences and other professional learning. School-based collaborative inquiry time is used to participate in group learning, introduce new teaching practices, seek areas of common interest, and to evaluate day-to-day work through the context of a shared inquiry question. Cycles of listening and reflection are designed and shared to assist in getting to a deeper level of inquiry – usually in pairs or small groups of colleagues. The use of an inquiry-based format keeps the learning more current and front-of-mind for participants.

A focus on students, and student learning, is important for participants planning their inquiry-based professional learning. Seeking feedback on student learning is a priority. Participants consider how to manage their inquiry within the classroom: they consider what data they are receiving from the students and wonder how to make learning more authentic to support student thinking and wondering. Participants also recognize, just as they have diverse learners in their classrooms, so do they have diverse learners as their colleagues. Participants constantly use reflection and inquiry routines to question how to meet student needs, to discover what learning is missing, and to assist student growth.

Through an inquiry framework, some participants still see professional development as helpful – it can offer another opportunity that a participant might not have otherwise considered. Despite this, participants explain that much of what is available or on offer today is what they

have experienced 15 or more years ago. It is rare for these participants to hear something that has not already been said by somebody else or that they have not already discovered in the classroom. Participants describe that a high frequency of learning opportunities are still “sit and get, like you just sit, you listen, they tell you, you take your notes, you go away.” Admittedly, participants indicate it is hard to have someone tell you what you need to learn within a traditional professional development sense.

Before inquiring, participants generally examine their own practice to determine areas needing growth, support, or improvement. Other things that influence the direction of inquiry are alternatives to current practice, alternatives to teaching a new concept, new ideas to try, and other activities to introduce. In some cases, a barrier to meaningful inquiry is when participants attempt to make their inquiry fit a pre-determined program they hope to implement. In these cases, teaching teams might have a goal or program they want to explore, so they bend and meld their professional learning process to fit into an inquiry question model when it is not about inquiry at all.

In some schools participants must collaborate by department or grade level team. Participants believe forced groupings lead to challenges, and that if people had the opportunity to group themselves according to inquiry interest the process might be more effective. Participants express an appreciation for connecting with colleagues through both formal, and informal, inquiry-based approaches. Conversations with colleagues allow participants an opportunity to examine their inquiry questions to uncover what is truly important, accessing layers of learning not previously considered. Feeling supported, and safe to make mistakes, allows participants to enjoy inquiry-based professional learning. Participants appreciate inquiry, finding beauty in the realization that there is not really a right or wrong way to approach the process.

Participants describe how inquiry-based opportunities lead to feeling more connected to subject matter, digging deeper, understanding concepts better, and being excited to try new things. When participants meet for their inquiry-based professional learning, their experiences move from theory into action. It was a common experience that collaborative teaching teams, and their inquiry hopes, were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, inquiry teams were just starting to implement new ideas related to their inquiry when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and this disrupted their plans. Although learning new technology can be overwhelming at times, participants celebrate learning new things during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Goal-based professional planning and development can be characterized as prescriptive, infrequent, occasional, and inflexible; either you do it or you don't. Participants still aim to take professional goals and make them into inquiry-based processes. Some participants explain the longer they work in education, the less goal-oriented they become – goals become something that holds a teacher back. That being said, in the first years of teaching, a goal-based approach to growth planning can still be really effective.

In their school division, creating an inquiry-based growth plan is supported by a template (or guiding document), which is used by participants. At the beginning of their learning about inquiry-based planning, the template was introduced to teaching staff in conjunction with conversations about annual professional growth plans. The layout of the guiding template supports questioning within inquiry and allows participants to consider useful strategies. Although past professional growth plans were still authentic, perhaps they were less authentic than this current inquiry-based professional growth plan model.

The process of professional inquiry can become difficult for participants whose everyday

responsibilities within a school take up the majority of their time. Participants who are newer to the profession will also have different questions and pressures on their time than a veteran teacher undertaking inquiry. Conflicting school-based priorities can sometimes overshadow a participant's passion for what they want to do – they must prioritize the daily tasks that in the moment will assist their teaching. A lack of time for collaboration and inquiry is an obstacle to success with the process. Participants are busy, and priorities beyond inquiry will put pressure on the experience. Participants have continuous bombardment within the school setting that can detract from their plans to inquire.

As inquiry-based practices grew in the school division, participants felt excitement about increasing autonomy over professional learning. Participants identify a barrier to inquiry being situations where they are told what their inquiry question will be. When participants are told what to investigate, they derive less benefit from the process. Anytime a participant can have autonomy, they can make their inquiry suit their passion and what they are striving for. The process cannot occur randomly; the inquiry has to mean something to the inquirer. Some participants admit their inquiry is at least in part driven by feelings of not meeting teaching standards, or areas of their own perceived professional weakness. Inquiry is driven from a place of seeking improvement. This can be improving practice, learning more about a topic, or identifying an area of lacking expertise.

Participants believe in the inquiry process, and that inquiry is one of the better ways to improve practice and engage in professional learning. To broaden collaboration, opportunities are sought to collaborate with other school sites and educational settings. Visiting different schools and programs satisfies participant curiosities about what others are doing and recommending. Inquiry-based professional learning allows for consistent evaluation through

check-in points. These check-ins are embedded within the process, and it takes work through action and continuous effort. The act of reflection makes participants better at what they do; participants use a reflective internal dialogue to consider which practices, strategies, and new learning to keep or dismiss.

Community-building, through the use of inquiry-based professional learning and growth, is an important experience for participants. Sharing information, encouraging discussion, and proposing collaborative strategies are all ways that colleagues encourage participation with inquiry. Participants explain that an obvious theme is that inquiry through professional learning leads to creating community. Through an initiative called collaborative communities, participants meet to share experiences and ideas, while connecting to educators in similar situations. When groups meet to collaborate, they explore an inquiry-based question together that aligns to their teaching positions and circumstances. Participants will also check-in with their collaborators, share what their students are learning, connect over information sharing, and work to gather information together.

Participants explain that they are naturally inquirers. For some participants, their experiences with inquiry began at the start of their careers. Early experiences of feeling part of a learning community taught participants how to drive and shape their professional practice. Inquiry, and being naturally curious and inquisitive, makes up a big part of participants' identity.

Inquiry-based professional learning, and the learning experiences that actively engage participants, are more common in professional learning today than they were ten years ago. Ongoing inquiry cycles can lead to more questions, and despite there being many different ways to pursue inquiry-based professional learning, the common thread with inquiry is that you learn a great deal.

Through the qualitative phenomenological analysis processes undertaken in this study, nine individual synopses and three general condensations illuminated several thematic findings. Those six main thematic findings, summarized in Table 4 (page 118), represent the overarching threads common to participants' experiences in this study: Relationships; Identity; Autonomy; Resources; Collaboration; and, Reflection.

Table 4

*Thematic Findings from Individual Synopses and General Condensations*

General Theme	Common Thematic Characteristics	The 'Who' and The 'How'
Relationships	Upholding relationships, Seeking and creating community, Encouraging dialogue with colleagues	From their experiences, participants identified three themes that are essential to who they are as professionals engaging in inquiry-based professional learning and growth: the <i>who</i> . These three themes are relationships, identity, and autonomy.
Identity	Connecting to inquiry, Valuing diversity, Engaging in meaningful ways	
Autonomy	Maintaining autonomy, Overcoming workload, Withstanding pressure	
Resources	Accessing time, Supporting inquiry, Sustaining learning and growth	From their experiences, participants identified three themes that are essential to how they engage with inquiry-based with professional learning and growth: the <i>how</i> . These three themes are resources, collaboration, and reflection.
Collaboration	Appreciating collaboration, Endorsing collaborative communities, Connecting inquiry and collaboration	
Reflection	Cycling through inquiry, Gathering feedback, Prioritizing reflection	



## Chapter Five: Discussion

This study focused on the lived experiences of participants in a mid-sized urban school division located in Alberta, Canada. The primary research question was: What is the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth? The data analysis and findings revealed what was essential to the role of inquiry in the experiences participants shared. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine in-service participants to gain an understanding of what experiences they believed were salient and essential to share. Although primary interview questions (and subsequent optional prompts) were scripted, participants in the study were encouraged to share any and all experiences and perceptions they felt were valuable to contribute.

Data was gathered from the semi-structured interviews with the nine participants. Participants were self-selected to participate in the study by consenting to an interview with the researcher. Invitations to participate were forwarded from the researcher to in-service participants via their school-based leadership teams (i.e., school principal), and respondent eligibility criteria was applied to select the nine candidates who would subsequently provide the data for this study. Each interview was audio recorded and transcripts of the audio recordings were generated. Through phenomenological processes (outlined in the methodology), an individual synopsis was generated based on each interview conducted for a total of nine synopses. Further to that, respondent synopses were considered alongside those of participants with similar years of teaching experience to create three general condensations of the research findings.

Through the use of phenomenological processes, the essence of what is essential to the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth is revealed through

this research. The goal of this qualitative data analysis is not to retrieve unwaveringly generalizable results, but to illuminate salient themes from the research. To that end, general findings emerged in the form of six key themes shared by respondents across the study, as outlined in the analysis of the findings shared in the previous chapter. The important thematic findings from the individual synopses and the general condensations derived from the research, relate directly back to the key question of the study. In considering the question, “What reveals, and is essential to, the role of inquiry in teachers’ experiences of professional learning and growth,” the findings indicate: Relationships, Identity, Autonomy, Resources, Collaboration, and Reflection are essential to the respondents’ experiences.

## **Relationships**

**Upholding relationships.** Participants experienced, and valued, strong relationships throughout their careers; in many cases, these relationships sustain them through difficult challenges. During trying times early in their careers, nurturing relationships allowed participants the confidence to grow. Over time, participants found staff members who became close collaborators, and sometimes mutual collaboration led to strong professional relationships and even friendships. By discussing the complexities of personal and professional life with colleagues at school, and partners at home, participants found clarity. As Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2011) described it, strengths-based approaches and appreciative inquiry allow “people to focus on their strengths, [and appreciative inquiry] changes the conversations from complaining to celebrating” (p. 444). The authors went on to say that “[b]y noticing and amplifying the good things that are going on, [appreciative inquiry] turns the tables on old conversation patterns about what is wrong and who is to blame” (p. 444). Upholding important relationships helped participants come to new understandings about their students, their

professional learning, and their role within the complex landscapes of teaching and learning.

Members of learning teams brought unique perspectives and perceptions which contributed to the inquiry process; participants appreciated this. When learning teams work through their inquiry together, it allowed them time to step aside from the daily stressors of the school environment to focus on something else entirely. Strong relationships supported inquiry-based learning and growth. Important to remember is that according to Orr and Cleveland-Innes (2015), leaders who practice appreciative inquiry techniques “trust the people they work with enough to step back and allow their staff, co-constructors of the organizational future vision, to get to work” (p. 238). Participants noted that methods of inquiry were also used and discussed in conversations with family members, administrators, and colleagues in education. The importance of upholding these relationships came through clearly in the experiences of participants in this study. The desire to sustain and maintain relationships motivated participants toward seeking and creating community.

**Seeking and creating community.** Through their research, Bryk and Schneider (2003) explained that “[i]n schools in which relational trust was improving over time, teachers increasingly characterized their colleagues as committed and loyal to the school and more eager to engage in new practices that might help students learn better” (p. 43). Participants in this current study sought opportunities to create community within their unique contexts. Through the use of inquiry-based professional learning strategies, participants experienced community-building with colleagues and peers. In some circumstances, teams of teachers worked together to choose an inquiry question, and through the process of inquiry, teachers surrounded themselves with community. Participants explained that one obvious theme is that inquiry through professional learning led to creating community. Inquiry-based professional learning experiences

drew participants to new communities of learners, and inquiry motivated participants toward finding people who were like-minded, deep thinkers on similar topics and subjects of inquiry.

To broaden collaboration, participants sought opportunities to collaborate with other schools and in other educational settings. Visiting different schools, classrooms, and programs, satisfied participant curiosities about what others were doing and recommending. Some participants found success with online collaboration. Connecting with teachers in an online community was said to be meaningful and inquiry-focused, especially when creators used inquiry-based questioning and prompting to motivate participants in these virtual spaces. Within their schools, participants also experienced connections with colleagues who shared similar interests – thus entrenching the school community relationships. According to Freidus et al. (2009), “professional development groups in which teachers actively engage in the reflective processes and look analytically at their own work and the work of their students foster both professional growth and professional pride” (p. 193). Collaborative inquiry within a school allowed participants to experience collective improvement, to seek common ground, and to have reflective conversations focused on growth. Through sustained relationships and the development of community, ongoing conversations and dialogue among colleagues continue to uplift relationships.

**Encouraging dialogue with colleagues.** Participants asked themselves how they can work with colleagues to use inquiry methods to shift their practice, solve challenges, and improve their schools. Participants also described that, over the past several years, school-wide inquiry has been facilitated through the guidance of school administration and the questions these leaders hoped to answer alongside their learning communities. Participants had many experiences within these contexts of collegial dialogue, planning, reflection, and collaboration.

In many different configurations – from subject specializations (“departments”) to grade level teams – participants experienced professional inquiry cohorts within schools. Participants described experiences working within tightly knit teams that collaborated on creating professional growth questions, which brought the focus of inquiry toward a collective pursuit. Conversations with colleagues allowed participants to examine their inquiry questions collectively and encouraged them to see new layers of learning not previously considered. As Yankelovich (1999) put it:

...dialogue is a process of successful relationship building. By performing the seemingly simple act of responding empathically, to others and in turn being heard by them, we transcend the constricting confines of the self. Instead of saying “you *or* me,” you hear yourself saying “you *and* me.” (p. 18)

Participants expressed appreciation for the connections with colleagues, both formally and informally, to address inquiry-based learning and growth. A strong and positive sense of relationship within the learning community was inextricably tied to a participants’ sense of identity.

## **Identity**

**Connecting to inquiry.** An important note made by contributing participants in this study was that the inquiry process can be very personal – this included goalsetting, reflection, and questioning. Sustaining high levels of personal interest, learning, and curiosity, was important. Professional questioning driven by inquiry was vital; participants warned of becoming stagnant as a person and a professional if the inquiry and questioning stops. Participants reported that inquiry practices helped them to consider the nature of learning, which is a process that developed over the course of a career. Learning was always a good thing, and asking questions

was always a good thing. Describing their research on positive teacher leadership, Cherkowski (2018) explained:

Through ongoing inquiry, teacher leaders may come to a greater awareness of who they are and how they can be showing up at work in a more authentic way, engaging in ongoing learning and improvement, and seeking out feedback to gain a sense of accomplishment as they begin to notice the ways they are making a positive difference in the life of the school. (p. 72)

Through their inquiry, participants had experiences learning more and more about what learning was. Some participants believed that inquiry always had a positive outcome in some way. These participants also believed inquiry was closely tied to who they were and what they did. Inquiry-based approaches were the only ones that some beginning participants knew, and their professional reflection became key to their process of connecting to inquiry.

Another key aspect of connecting to inquiry was that their inquiry question had to matter to them and be relevant to their pursuits. Participants hoped that every educator had an inquiry question that was unique to them. The process of inquiry could not occur randomly; the inquiry had to mean something to the inquirer. For some participants, being naturally curious and inquisitive made up a large part of their identity; to these participants, their personal lives focused on building and creating things, which they described as an inquiry-based process. Again, Cherkowski (2018) contended that “providing opportunities for teacher leaders to connect with colleagues to reflect on what matters most to them may be a potentially powerful tool for ongoing leadership development” (p. 72). Participants in this study explained that inquiry was not always about gaining knowledge, but that it could offer a lot more room to grow than just acquiring information. When an inquiry question is a matter of the heart, participants became

more interested, engaged, and excited to make meaning of their learning. Through connecting to the inquiry process—and honouring their unique roles in that process—participants acknowledged another fundamental action linked to identity: valuing diversity.

**Valuing diversity.** Each participant was unique and carried with them aspects of their personal identity. Being allowed the permission to inquire in individual ways, throughout a career in education, was important. Some participants had experiences with inquiry from their first days of teaching; they described an inquiry-based process as less rigid, not as clear-cut, but also generating a sense of freedom in learning. Inquiring participants wanted to own their learning. What they found personally relevant drove them to learn more, reflect, actively think, invest deeply, and relate their inquiry back to their own diverse teaching experiences. Along this vein, Donohoo and Katz (2017) explained that “[w]hen teachers attribute students’ successes and failures to internal factors that are controllable—such as to instructional strategies, effective feedback, or systems of intervention—they come to believe that their actions can influence student achievement” (p. 25). Through their responses, participants acknowledged that some personalities are naturally inquiry-driven, and some are not. Participants explained that colleagues who were not naturally drawn to an inquiry approach struggled with the process. Through valuing their diversity, participants found positive experiences with inquiry when they pursued personally relevant questions, attempted new strategies, gathered evidence, observed their own classroom, and actively reflected through dialogue with colleagues. Also imperative was that participants encouraged one another to bring their best version of self – an authentic self – to the classroom every day. Once participants felt connected to inquiry, and that their unique diversity was valued, they were ready to engage in meaningful ways.

**Engaging in meaningful ways.** The process of inquiry can be fairly broad; however, it

can also afford participants avenues of exploration and meaningful approaches toward their own learning. Participants desired opportunities to challenge themselves in their own ways while still having access to collaborative approaches, a sense of team, and a trusted colleague to talk to and connect with. Engagement with inquiry-based learning comes through personal experiences and personal connections because, as participants explained, this makes learning meaningful.

Townsend and Adams (2009) emphasized that:

Common threads such as the value of experience, the importance of relationships, and pragmatic sustainability are woven into collaborative inquiry. All participants bring to the process a variety of experiences that are integral to success; all forms of participant knowledge are seen as being valuable for the contributions they make to learning. (p. 43)

Inquiry was described as central to the work teachers do in professional learning and growth – the inquiry question was at the heart of the learning, and everything led back to that.

Participants optimistically emphasized the need to make the best of what each experience brought. Under certain conditions, participants also found ways to care deeply about the outcomes of their inquiry, created a strong personal investment, and sustained their curiosities. Some of those specific conditions included having the autonomy to inquire, the ability to make choices, feelings of personal initiative, a strong sense of engagement, opportunities to learn more, and an overall alignment of their inquiry questions. As Schaefer and Clandinin (2019) explained it, “[w]e know that teacher identities are both personal and professional and are shaped by the contexts in which teachers live and work” (p. 62). Deep thinking on a topic fostered meaningful engagement, and personally relevant topics sustained the motivation for inquiry. Participants noticed that when their colleagues wanted to learn—and were excited by their learning—they were more likely to care about their work and invest in doing the best job they



could. Once participants achieved strong relationships, and could acknowledge that their individual identity was valued, autonomy over their unique inquiry process became necessary.

### **Autonomy**

**Maintaining autonomy.** Through sharing their experiences during this research, participants explained that as inquiry-based practices grew in their school division, they felt excitement about increasing autonomy over professional learning. The participants said that any time a teacher can have autonomy, they can make their inquiry suit their passion and what they were striving to achieve. Since so much of teaching can encompass the roles, tasks, and mandates associated with the profession, the autonomy to choose a direction within inquiry-based professional practices was valued by participants. It could be a struggle to find engagement in the process when new professional learning was introduced but was not connected to the inquiry focus teachers mapped out from the beginning of the school year. Autonomy over inquiry, and diversity within the process, were important to participants. Townsend and Adams (2009) affirmed that developing a “question that is thorough, succinct, and inclusive of the diverse interests of all team members is a difficult but necessary task. The process involves often lengthy and challenging conversations that reflect the values, beliefs, and teaching philosophies of participants” (p. 45). Participants advocated for the autonomy to inquire in ways that were personally meaningful, and they emphasized that – as professionals – they deserved the autonomy to seek out learning and to discover the answer to inquiry on their own terms.

**Overcoming workload.** Despite advocating for autonomy over the inquiry process, participants could become overwhelmed and unsure about where to start with inquiry, and sometimes they started in the wrong spot. Early years participants, and those new to inquiry-

based processes, could struggle without practical, clear examples that explained the process of undertaking this work. The learning curve was very steep during the first years of teaching, and navigating multiple priorities was difficult. When participants spread themselves too thinly, it became hard to improve in even one area of growth. First-year teachers, and teachers early in their careers, had a lot on the go. Those participants who were new to the profession were more likely to be overwhelmed by approaching new inquiry tasks than their veteran participant colleagues with more experience. According to Dana and Silva (2000), there must be a strong alignment between teacher inquiry and their day-to-day workload, teaching activities, and classroom expectations. In this way, inquiry should be embedded as opposed to an “add on;” inquiry is most successful when it is acknowledged as part of an ongoing teaching experience, as opposed to “one more thing”. Study participants had continuous bombardment within the school setting that could detract from their plans to inquire, and they acknowledged that trying to engage in deep research while teaching full-time was occasionally difficult and even overwhelming. The everyday responsibilities within a school took up the majority of participants’ time, making engaging in inquiry-focused tasks hard to do. As participants prioritized those daily tasks that, in the moment, assisted their teaching, conflicting school-based priorities could sometimes overshadow a participant’s passion for what they truly wanted to accomplish.

**Withstanding pressure.** Akin to maintaining autonomy over inquiry, and overcoming the pressures of workload, participants emphasized the need to withstand pressures. Participants had experiences with division-wide professional development where they were told where to go, what to do, and how to do it; they identified a barrier to inquiry being situations where they were told what their inquiry question would be. These challenges raised by participants signaled a lack

of trust within the professional learning environment. In contrast, Adams and Forsyth (2013) described that “[m]ost forms of faculty trust have an indirect effect on student performance by creating conditions supportive of teaching effectiveness” (p. 2); the presence of faculty trust led to effective teaching. Conversely, when participants in the current study were told what to investigate, they derived less benefit from the process – it was also hard to have someone tell you what you need to learn within a traditional professional development sense. In some cases, participants had limited control of their inquiry-based professional learning in the early years of their careers; they found it difficult to recall this learning because they were not the ones developing the inquiry questions. Participants felt external pressure when too much credence was placed upon the perspectives of external experts. An overreliance on expert opinion and advice could interrupt what participants already knew to be best practice. It was also frustrating for participants when they were pressured to work with colleagues who did not engage with the inquiry process. When participants did not have full autonomy over their inquiry planning, they felt less satisfaction in the process. As Adams (2016) explained it, “[i]nquiry and study of teachers has been something that gets done to and about them, while their own learning typically happens outside of the ‘daily grind’” (p. 31). Additionally, when an external focus for learning was imposed on participants, they were less likely to take extra steps to go further in the learning. One final note was that inquiry-based professional learning could be a lot of work for participants, and in some cases, large inquiry projects with limited access to resources led to further frustrations and experiences of being overwhelmed.

## **Resources**

**Accessing time.** Through the process of gathering data for this research study, participants expressed that access to adequate resources had a considerable influence over their

experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Of note was that a lack of time for collaboration and inquiry was an obstacle to success with the process. Through their research, Adams (2016) revealed that “[p]roviding sufficient time, and finding ways to embed that time into the workday, is a major challenge to successful collaborative inquiry” (p. 31). There is a time investment required for staff to build inquiry-based growth plans. Although participants valued time for collaboration with colleagues, the many shifting priorities in a school could sometimes prevent this meaningful work. Participants planned to gather on their own time (including after school), to discuss approaches to their inquiry planning. In the recent past, global events have influenced participants’ access to time as well. Participants expressed how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pressure on collaborative time. Opportunities to connect with, and be in contact with, colleagues were reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An additional barrier participants expressed was that school-based collaborative time often excluded some participants when they were the only teacher at their grade level or in their subject specialization at the school. Having adequate time and the right conditions for teacher collaboration was important.

In their school division, participants explained that several professional learning days were amassed into one week in October (near the start of the school year). Scheduling these days together, as opposed to spreading them out, was questioned by participants. Although some of this time was used to work on inquiry-based questions within collaborative teams, participants wondered if a more efficient and effective way of inquiry growth planning was to distribute more days throughout the school year. Discussion of inquiry-based professional growth plans, through dialogue with administrators, brought a lot of value to the inquiry process; unfortunately, participants explained that these conversations with school leaders (requiring a lot of time) were

not emphasized enough. Wallin (2008) explained that “[i]n an inquiry-based approach, we are thus called to afford both time and energy in allowing our explorations and encounters the opportunity to unfold, despite the risk this might pose to our pet theories or rigid plans” (p. 320). Participants in the current study believed they should be reflecting more often, but they understood that opportunities for meaningful reflection and personal questioning were limited by time. Inquiry-based professional learning would benefit from regularly scheduled and dedicated time for participants to be heard, reflect, and share perspectives with a trusted colleague; this would lead to becoming a better, more effective professional.

Participants invested in a division initiative, called Collaborative Communities, which allowed them to connect with professionals with similar interests from across the school division. They found this work to be important, but they wondered if two half-day sessions each year (the time set aside for this initiative) was enough time to truly explore an inquiry topic collaboratively. This limited time could lead to some participants avoiding the deep investment required to derive benefit from the collaborative community. At the beginning of their transition toward inquiry-based growth plans, professional learning, and growth, participants indicated the thought of meeting monthly to discuss this work seemed overwhelming; now, participants believed that without meeting regularly the inquiry would be too easy to put back on the shelf.

As Quintero (2017) explained it:

The social side of education reform underscores a critical oversight in the public debate on education and its policies: the idea that teaching and learning are not solo but rather social endeavors that are achieved in the context of schools and their broader school systems and communities, through relationships and partnerships rather than competition and a focus on individual prowess. (p. 20)

Within the lived reality of day-to-day teaching, teams of participants had the odd moment to discuss inquiry together during staff meetings; mostly this work took place during collaborative time set aside on professional learning days. A lack of time was always a barrier to teacher collaboration. Participants expressed a desire for more collaboration and lamented not having enough time to reflect on practice and discuss with colleagues. Aside from time, participants emphasized the importance of support for inquiry as a needed resource as well.

**Supporting inquiry.** Participants revealed that ongoing support for inquiry was essential to their experiences of professional learning and growth – the support they received in pursuing inquiry-based practices could be characterized as a vital resource. Inquiring for participants often started with accessing peers and colleagues for support, and then expanding to selecting conferences and other professional learning opportunities to extend this support. Freidus et al. (2009) believed increasing teacher confidence could be attributed to teacher collaborative learning groups and “related to a comfort in exploring challenges rather than being threatened by them. And, this comfort appears to be directly related to the feeling of membership in a learning community” (p. 189). Unfortunately, accessing colleagues, seeking conferences, and exploring new networks, were all impeded by the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, inquiry teams were just starting to implement new ideas related to their inquiry when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and this disrupted their plans. Participants appreciated the availability of technology support for the purpose of remaining as connected as possible to other educators throughout the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversations with colleagues, and school administrators, were important ways that participants also felt supported in their experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth. These discussions were appreciated, and they led to participants feeling rewarded when they received feedback for their growth.

Within their school division, participants used a growth planning template (developed by academics and researchers at a local university) as a guide and template. Participants described this tool as helpful in creating accountability, supporting inquiry question development, and focusing reflection on the teaching competencies. The growth planning template also supported the development of participants' professional learning plan for the school year ahead. Despite all of the conversations, planning, and support systems that upheld inquiry-based learning for participants, best laid plans could still go sideways. According to Wallin (2008):

...this is the risk of *any* significant learning that cannot anticipate in advance what it might encounter and how it might be transformed. In this manner, inquiry marks both the peril *and* joy of keeping the door open, attentive to the arrival of the unanticipated. Such is our obligation as educators and stewards of an abundant curricular inheritance. (p. 321)

Participants were open to making mistakes within their inquiry. This openness paralleled the messages they sent to students that when a mistake was made, learning was happening. For inquiry to be fully effective, participants needed to feel supported in a safe environment. Feeling supported, and safe to make mistakes, allowed participants to enjoy the process of inquiry-based professional learning. Participants appreciated inquiry, finding beauty in the realization that there was not really a right or wrong way to approach the process. In addition to accessing time, and seeking support with the inquiry process, participants also emphasized the importance of sustaining learning and growth.

**Sustaining learning and growth.** While teacher inquiry had the adaptability to change throughout the school year, or from year-to-year, the expectation for consistent growing and learning for participants remained constant. In order to sustain this learning and growth, access to high quality professional resources allowed participants to go in-depth into their inquiry

questions. Through their research on collaborative writing and forms of action research, Townsend and Adams (2009) wrote:

It is not easy for groups of teachers to suspend their disbelief and commit to such forms of knowledge-generation that focus so directly on individual classrooms, and depend so heavily on the evidence of student learning that results from each other's purposeful efforts. (p. 42)

One important resource previously discussed was the inquiry-focused growth planning template participants used as a guide and a tool for recording the process and reflecting on growth and improvement. This planning template was one that participants used to start, and sustain, the inquiry process. At the beginning of their learning about inquiry-based planning, the template was introduced to teaching staff in conjunction with conversations about annual professional growth plans. The planning tool facilitated practice, emphasized guiding areas, and supported inquiry. The tool was especially helpful at the start of the inquiry process. The layout of the guiding template supported questioning within inquiry and allowed participants to consider useful strategies for sustaining their learning.

Professional volunteer opportunities exposed participants to experiences beyond the walls of their schools, too. Working through inquiry-based processes while engaging in professional volunteerism deepened participant knowledge and sustained their learning and growth. In addition to these experiences, participants advocated there is some need for accessing individuals with specific expertise (aka, 'experts') to share information with those who required that support. Participants also had experiences being supported by effective administrators in their schools. As Breakspear (2015) argued, "setting a culture of experimentation and observation can be a fantastic way for school leaders to reduce the amount of bravery required to try new things" (p.



17). According to participants' experiences, effective administrators could either be more inquiry-based in their approaches, or more management-based in their efforts. Either way, participants expressed the need for administrator support in sustaining their ongoing learning and growth. Along with the interconnectedness of relationships, identity, and autonomy – and in light of the discussion of access to resources for sustained learning and growth – participants expressed the importance of collaboration to their experiences.

### **Collaboration**

**Appreciating collaboration.** What revealed, and was essential to, the role of inquiry in participants' experiences of professional learning and growth, was that collaboration is paramount. Participants saw deep value in collaborative professional learning, especially when it was inquiry-based in nature. While working in a collaborative team, participants had important conversations about what was successful and what did not work. Through their research, Adams and Townsend (2014) noted that “participants reported that they came to understand collaborative inquiry as an important strategy that helped them reflect on their practice in an environment of mutual support and respect” (para 22). Participants in the current study enjoyed the process of “talking shop,” and sometimes observing one another teach. Conversations were used to find common ground and uncover areas of mutual inquiry and learning. Through shared inquiry and collaboration, participants got to know their colleagues including how their classrooms worked and what motivated them to grow. Participants appreciated these opportunities to share with colleagues and they contributed to a mutual expertise that built upon meeting their own professional learning needs. Some participants explained that their natural tendency was to seek out collaboration, and that this was their favourite way to learn.

**Endorsing collaborative communities.** Participants had experiences with an initiative in

their school division, called Collaborative Communities, as another way to focus inquiry-based learning, sharing information, and connection with colleagues from diverse school sites. As Olivier and Huffman (2016) explained it, “[a]s the professional learning community process has become embedded within schools, the level of district support has a direct impact on whether or not schools have the ability to flourish and sustain highly effective collaborative practices” (p. 304). When participants did not have a cohesive inquiry team within their school, the collaborative community allowed them to engage and connect with colleagues in similar roles at other schools. Additionally, some participants developed inquiry questions individually at their school, but used division-based collaborative communities to find colleagues whose ideas closely related to their own area of inquiry. Participants appreciated and valued the opportunity to create communities of inquiry-focused professional learning across their school division. Participants would also check-in with their collaborators, share what their students were learning, connect over information sharing, and work to gather information together. Participants in this study described experiences along the lines of Dana and Silva (2000), in that “[w]hatever the subject of a teacher’s inquiry, the process of teacher inquiry is exhilarating, renewing, and rewarding for teachers” (p. 28). Collaborating with colleagues from across the division with similar interests supported participants in achieving their inquiry goals and developing as professionals.

**Connecting inquiry and collaboration.** Through purposeful decision-making and ongoing, intentional planning, participants connected their efforts with inquiry and collaboration. Staff in schools inquired personally, but they also met as colleagues to collaborate. Participants were influenced by inquiry-based learning when they joined other groups of participants to share and collaborate. In many contexts, staff worked together to narrow the scope of their chosen areas of improvement. They shared their inquiry-based questions with colleagues – this might

have been during staff meetings, or by posting their questions to shared spreadsheets for other teachers to read. Learning cohorts were created through this sharing when teachers with similar inquiry questions sought out colleagues for collaboration. According to Svendsen (2016), “[i]n a learning community of teachers who are actively working to develop their skills, critical reflection with colleagues who have similar experiences should be promoted” (p. 321). Svendson (2016) continued to explain that “[t]eachers found that the reflection process with colleagues gave motivation to their own teaching practice. This led them to think differently about their own teaching and the chance to try out new methods in the classroom” (p. 321). School-based collaborative inquiry time was used to participate in group learning, introduce new teaching practices, seek areas of common interest, and to evaluate day-to-day work through the context of a shared inquiry question. In some schools, inquiry teams were built on grade level taught or area of subject specialization, and collaborative work was generated through collective reflection, ongoing discussion, and commitment to shared goals. Participants found success with their inquiry-based professional learning and growth through relationships, identity, and autonomy; additionally, they created and sustained learning by accessing resources, collaboration, and reflection.

## **Reflection**

**Cycling through inquiry.** Participants described learning as a life-long process, and they compared this to the cyclical, unending inquiry process. Continuous reflection and questioning prompted participants to consider whether an inquiry cycle was finished or if it should continue into the future. Participants wondered if whether, since there was always more learning to do, one ever really achieved an inquiry goal. Since any inquiry is positive, even if the desired outcome was not achieved, participants could always start again having learned something from

the process. Participants had experiences where they rewrote inquiry questions mid-year because their learning had taken a different direction. Cycles of continuous opportunity to learn, grow, reflect, and repeat, were valuable processes. This notion of reflection on inquiry is supported by Dana and Silva (2000) who explained that “[t]he final process of a teacher inquiry is writing up the results of a particular inquiry and sharing the findings with others” (p. 28). Before they started planning for their current year inquiry questions, participants reflected on past school years, looked to past inquiries for continuous themes, reflected on past experiences, and considered their current teaching assignment for areas of professional growth. Personal investment was required for inquiry to be successful, and in some cases, participants experienced an ongoing inquiry cycle lasting for three or more years. Inquiry-based professional learning allowed for consistent evaluation through check-in points. These check-ins were embedded within the process, and it took work through action and continuous effort. Ongoing inquiry cycles would lead to more questions, and despite there being many different ways to pursue inquiry-based professional learning, the common thread with inquiry was that you learned a great deal. Cycles of listening and reflection were designed and shared to assist in getting to a deeper level of inquiry – usually in pairs or small groups of colleagues.

The more experiences participants had, the more inquiry played an important role in their lives. The process of inquiry could mean developing a question that a participant would like to explore – it was not actually about answering the question so much as exploring it. Participants believed that as time went on, and experiences grew, they were making better inquiries. These inquiries would thrive based on better questions that built, focused, and directed participants’ actions toward what meaningful professional learning should be. Reflection on inquiry was a common theme for participants, and they viewed inquiry as an important aspect of their

professional lives. True, effective inquiry questions were never really answered, although they could be fulfilled in many ways. According to Krell and Dana (2012), the action research and inquiry cycle “is an active process for teachers and provides teachers with space to critically examine their own practices and beliefs while also allowing them to interact with colleagues and external resources in order to gain insights from each other” (p. 829). Inquiry was explained as cyclical: incorporating theory, practice, reflection, and revision based on experience. Inquiry-based methods were described as beneficial whether positive, negative, or neutral; they were experiences for reflection and improvement. When methods were not successful, participants gathered more feedback and tried something different.

**Gathering feedback.** Participants emphasized the importance of seeking feedback from the classroom environment to inform the development of inquiry questions. A focus on students, and student learning, was important for participants planning their inquiry-based professional learning. Participants inquired, asked questions, and made predictions on what was best for students. Seeking feedback on student learning was a priority and reflecting on better meeting the needs of all students through teacher collaborative efforts became a priority. Because of these priorities, participants asked themselves to be flexible enough to shift their inquiry as they got to know and understand their students. According to Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019), the “impact on student learning is the *raison d’être* of leading professional growth planning; growth planning that is divorced from the specific impacts on students is both incongruent and ineffective” (p. 179). It was also important to determine common interests held by students for the purpose of learning and working together as a whole. The inquiry process allowed an inquiry question to be front-of-mind regularly, and participants observed students regularly to gather feedback and data on the extent to which inquiry was improving the

classroom environment. For many participants, the first focus of professional learning was to consider student needs and then to inquire about how they were doing, what they needed, and what it would take to move the students forward.

Participants used questioning and inquiry methods right from the beginning of the school year to wonder about what they wanted to learn and what their focus would be. After being in the classroom for a while at the start of the year, participants became surer of their inquiry focus. Each new situation deserved an opportunity to reflect on what worked and what did not. Participants used inquiry-based methods to fill their own gaps and to ask themselves how to improve, how to do everything possible to meet student's needs, and how to consider student experiences in their classrooms. Reflecting on the class composition, and student needs, guided participants to where they needed to improve professionally. Connecting with students and building an understanding of how they learned and behaved emotionally allowed participants to build stronger relationships. Feedback on teacher inquiry and growth came from many different sources including students, families, and colleagues. Townsend and Adams (2009) contended that "school staffs are most likely to make productive links between professional development and improved student learning when their professional growth activities are job-embedded and relate to the immediacy of their teaching practice" (p. 132). Inquiry-based professional learning was seen as collaborative and engaging; participants gathered information, shared experiences, discussed student reactions, and worked together to experience growth.

**Prioritizing reflection.** Participant inquiry was most often driven from a place of seeking improvement. This could be improving practice, learning more about a topic, or identifying an area of lacking expertise. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) argued:

...that communities for teacher research—communities with particular ways of

organizing time, using talk, constructing texts, and interpreting the tasks of teaching and schooling—have the potential to move teacher research from fringe to forefront by fostering reforms that amount to more than tinkering with or reinforcing existing structures. (p. 320)

Participants used a reflective internal dialogue to consider which practices, strategies, and new learning to keep or dismiss. Before inquiring, participants generally examined their own practices to determine areas needing growth, support, or improvement. Other things that influenced the direction of inquiry were alternatives to current practice, alternatives to teaching a new concept, new ideas to try, and other activities to introduce. Participants identified a strong connection between being an inquiry-based student and being an inquiry-based teacher.

Participants strove for constant improvement within their education programs, and they asked themselves, “How can I be better or what can I do better,” while creating inquiry-based learning opportunities for students. This ongoing prioritization of reflection activities was a common thematic finding from the research in this study.

Annual inquiry goals shifted and were influenced by classroom composition, student need, and the types of learnings present in the classroom. Participants considered how to manage their inquiry within the classroom: they considered what data they were receiving from the students and wondered how to make learning more authentic to support student thinking and wondering. Participants used methods of inquiry-based professional learning to understand that classroom context is everchanging. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992), “teacher research communities are not, and should not be, grounded in consensus, but rather they are sites of critical reflection on the discourses themselves” (p. 316). Inquiry helped participants see that education was a work in progress and nothing was set in stone. Participants revisited their

inquiry questions frequently; they were living out the inquiry and continuously attempting to grow through it. Past inquiries influenced current practice, and inquiry questions, explorations, and learning from previous years continued to influence growth in the present. Participants inquired about what they would take away from an experience before it took place, and during phases of formal reflection – on professional learning days, for example – inquiry teams analyzed how they were progressing, and they would discuss next phases of their inquiry. Participants constantly used reflection and inquiry routines to question how to meet student needs, to discover what learning was missing, and to assist student growth.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

The important influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its role in this research study, should be acknowledged. During the interview and data gathering stages of the study, all COVID-19 pandemic precautions were followed in accordance with both public health advisories and requirements of the school division in which the research took place. Several interviews were conducted using TEAMS or Zoom, which eliminated the need for precautions like masking and hand sanitizing. When interviews were conducted in person, personal protective measures such as hand hygiene, masking, and social distancing were all observed by participants and the researcher. The COVID-19 pandemic was an ever-evolving and ever-changing global health concern that in some way affected all participants in this research study. In fact, participants shared their experiences that were both essential to the primary research question, and prescient to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the research participants, a major impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was on the ability of participants to collaborate effectively. Opportunities to collaborate in-person within schools, between school sites, across school divisions, and regionally or provincially,



were either lost or extremely restricted at points during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant experiences such as traveling to conferences, joining regional consortia learning events, or attending Teachers' Conventions, were either cancelled or switched to online/remote learning opportunities. Participants identified the juxtaposition between the disappointing loss of in-person, collegial learning experiences, and the comfort and convenience of learning in an online environment either from home or school.

Respondents identified some positive perspectives emerging from forced innovation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, it was understood that participants' use of technology improved as it related to online teaching, communicating, and collaborating. This notable shift in the use of digital technologies was out of sheer necessity; without connecting online there would have been no ability to teach at certain points during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, without access to online meeting spaces, teacher professional learning and collaboration would have ceased to exist due to in-person meeting restrictions, cohort requirements, and the inability to travel. The need to seek new collaborative learning spaces online drove participants to find other educators with similar interests from across the province, across Canada, and internationally. Participants noted the positive affects that connecting online generated for them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did participants build new relationships with passionate educators with similar interests, collaborating in online environments allowed participants to build new skills and confidence with technology.

The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, teachers, families, and education in general is something that will likely fuel a lot of academic research in the decades to come. That being said, the smaller scale and intimate affects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher collaboration, professional learning, and collegial relationships, was more immediately

observable for the participants in this research. This study does not make any recommendations or draw any conclusions related to the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic changed participants' experiences of professional learning and growth; however, stakeholder groups with a vested interest in the experiences of teachers, including school leaders, may want to keep these considerations at the forefront.

### **Recommendations and Implications for School Leaders**

The roles that site-based school leaders occupy in support of teaching and learning are many. Generally speaking, school leadership teams facilitate, coordinate, and participate in all aspects of the educational programming in schools, while simultaneously establishing and maintaining the cultures of thinking and learning within the school community. When considering the primary research question in this study, the implications for school leadership teams must also be front-of-mind. Through a discussion of what reveals, and is essential to, the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth, connections to the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) will be relevant for school leaders. In addition to pointing out relevant competencies and indicators of the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), some recommendations will be offered as to how school leadership teams can implement or sustain efforts in the six key themes developed through the research findings. While this discussion and its recommendations are not an exhaustive list, they establish a starting point for stakeholder groups interested in exploring further.

**Relationships.** The Government of Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) is a document outlining nine key competencies, with associated indicators of competency achievement, that guides school leadership development in the province. The first competency, Fostering Effective Relationships, explains that "[a] leader builds positive working

relationships with members of the school community and local community,” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3) and this ties closely to findings in this study that indicated relationships are vitally important. To achieve this competency, Indicator ‘H’ explains that school leaders who are fostering effective relationships are also “engaging in collegial relationships while modeling and promoting open, collaborative dialogue” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). Participants expected that school leaders maintain collegial relationships within the learning community, while also modeling the types of positive collaborative dialogue they expect will permeate the school. As Bryk and Schneider (2003) explained it:

An interrelated set of mutual dependencies are embedded within the social exchanges in any school community. Regardless of how much formal power any given role has in a school community, all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts. (p.41)

Relationships are complicated, but school leaders achieving this first competency are committed to continuously establishing and maintaining positive connections throughout the learning community.

Through this study, participants indicated that relationships are essential to the role of inquiry in their experiences of professional learning and growth. As it relates to Fostering Effective Relationships, Indicator ‘J’ describes that school leaders are “implementing processes for improving working relationships and dealing with conflict within the school community” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). The focus on strong and healthy working relationships within the school community is important here; school leaders play a substantial role in creating the culture of healthy relationships that participants requested. In fact, Dana and Silva (2000) emphasized that “inquiry appears to be a meaningful supervision experience that provides both

prospective and practicing teachers with a collaborative tool for more independent, career-long professional growth and development” (p. 29). Within the fourth competency, Leading a Learning Community, it is explained that “[a] leader nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). According to Indicator ‘C’, school leaders are entrusted with “developing a shared responsibility for the success of all students” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). School leaders will understand that collaborating around shared responsibilities requires a deep understanding of collegial relationships and the interpersonal dynamics of working with individuals who often present divergent needs, experiences, and expectations.

**Identity.** The second general theme emerging from participants in this research study was an acknowledgment that aspects of individual identity are important to the role of inquiry in their experiences. Through an analysis of the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), specific competencies and indicators inform school leaders in affirming and validating identity. Competency three, Embodying Visionary Leadership, indicates that “[a] leader collaborates with the school community to create and implement as shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). To that end, Indicator ‘B’ advises on “recognizing the school community’s values and aspirations and demonstrating an appreciation for diversity” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). When school leaders appreciate the values, aspirations, perspectives, and diversity of the teachers in their building, they can also demonstrate their commitment to upholding their unique identities. As Bryk and Schneider (2003) explained it, “[r]elational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students” (p. 44). They go on to explain that “[i]mproving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the

work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong” (p. 44).

Indicators described in competency four, Leading a Learning Community, also speak to teacher identity and nurturing a school community. When school leaders are achieving Indicator ‘A’ of this competency, they are “fostering in the school community equality and respect with regard to rights as provided for in the *Alberta Human Rights Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). This focus on valuing and honouring the individual and recognizing their place within both provincial and national legislation aimed at upholding human rights, reminds school leaders that individual identity matters to the learning community. As Bryk and Schneider (2003) described it:

Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. Effective principals couple these behaviours with a compelling school vision and behaviour that clearly seeks to advance the vision. (p. 43)

Indicator ‘B’ explains that competent school leaders are “creating an inclusive learning environment in which diversity is embraced, a sense of belonging is emphasized, and all students and staff are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3-4). Very closely aligned to this indicator is that of competency one, Indicator ‘C’ which states that leaders are charged with “creating a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). Both separately and in combination, these indicators outline the importance of school leadership emphasizing the value of teacher identity. Teachers are individuals with complex personal, social, and professional identities that are inextricably linked to their roles as educators, and school leaders have a responsibility to support these identities.

**Autonomy.** When respondents participated in this research study, autonomy was a strong

and consistent theme in terms of what is essential to teachers' experiences with inquiry, and professional learning and growth. Autonomy over the process of inquiry, and a clear appreciation for individual control over professional learning and growth decisions, is very important to participants. According to the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), school leaders can demonstrate their aptitude through competency two (Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning), competency six (Providing Instructional Leadership), and competency seven (Developing Leadership Capacity). Within competency two, Indicator 'A' upholds the importance of autonomy; it states that school leaders are "engaging with others such as teachers, principals and other leaders to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). Effective school leaders will engage teachers in building the personal and professional capacities they require to become experts in self-determined priority areas. According to Breakspear (2015), "[i]nnovative change can only come from frontline educators forming insights, learning, and experimenting with new ideas and methodologies – in partnership with their students" (p. 14). Of course, school leaders support teachers in demonstrating the skills and attributes required for teacher certification and to achieve the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018c); however, the support and mentorship required to help others "build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise," (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3) goes beyond this. School leaders achieving this competency see the ambitions and goals of teachers they support and actively work to honour their colleagues' autonomy over the direction of their career.

Another way that school leaders will honour teacher autonomy with inquiry-based professional learning and growth is through competency 6, Providing Instructional Leadership. Indicator 'A' of competency 6 indicates that school leaders are "building the capacity of teachers

to respond to the learning needs of all students” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). Through research gathered in this study, teachers are steadfast in their belief that autonomy with professional inquiry leads to improved outcomes in the process. Student learning and improved outcomes to the learning needs of all students is core to thinking and learning in educational settings. Through their research, Adams and Forsyth (2013) argued that “collective faculty trust enables teachers to use student-centered instructional practices that build self-regulation and that foster engagement in learning activities” (p. 18). To this end, when school leaders plan to support capacity-building in teachers, they commit to honouring the autonomy teachers have over creating their inquiry. There is professional learning designed to support teachers in responding to learning needs of all students, and at times this falls outside of an inquiry framework; it is just required knowledge and best practice. When school leaders prioritize the learning teachers advocate for and create opportunities to build the capacity of teachers through inquiry-based questioning and planning, coherence in collaborative learning is strengthened.

Competency 7, entitled Developing Leadership Capacity, states that “[a] leader provides opportunities for members of the school community to develop leadership capacity and to support others in fulfilling their educational goals” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). School leaders can support teacher autonomy with their inquiry through Indicator ‘A’ by “demonstrating consultative and collaborative decision-making that is informed by open dialogue and multiple perspectives” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). According to Cherkowski (2018):

Positive teacher leadership, with an attention toward growing wellbeing, might serve as a capacity-builder for growing more wellbeing in schools—as teacher leaders work with others to grow wellbeing for all they are likely to benefit as well from their positive

leadership in service of improving teaching, learning, and living well together in schools.  
(p. 71)

Open dialogue is key to a successful school community when it supports collaboration, builds relationship, and honours individual perspectives for the purpose of learning. When school leaders value teacher autonomy and help sustain unique inquiry pathways through collaborative decision-making and consultative practices, teachers will develop their leadership capacity in the process. The key to merging this leadership competency with the importance of teacher autonomy, are the mentoring relationships that school leaders sustain with their colleagues.

**Resources.** In many ways, the provision of resources was identified by teachers as having an influence over their experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth. As school leaders reflect on how to support teachers with their access to important resources, certain indicators of the leadership competencies provide insight. Competency 8 is Managing School Operations and Resources. Within that competency, Indicator ‘D’ explains that school leaders are “following through on decisions made by allocating resources (human, physical, technological and financial) to provide the learning environments and supports needed to enable and/or improve learning for all students” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 5). As Breakspear (2015) explained it:

By fostering dynamic thinking *and* removing the inhibitions to experimentation, school leaders can create the culture and conditions needed to see tangible innovations to real-world teaching practice. Systematically empowering educators to learn and try new things can cause promising practices to proliferate and spread through the system. (p. 17)

As teachers plan for their inquiry-based learning, they are generally aware of the need for specific resources to support their growth. Through strong relationships and ongoing



conversations about teacher growth, school leaders will identify the ways in which teachers are asking to be supported – either through human, physical, technological, or financial resources that align to teacher inquiry, educational priorities, and student learning within the school community.

Teachers indicate that resources are vital to their experiences of inquiry-based professional learning and growth. According to Donohoo and Katz (2017), “[s]chool leaders play a pivotal role in helping teams stay focused on the urgent, needs-based inquiry question” (p. 26). Previously discussed is competency 6, Providing Instructional Leadership. Within this competency, two indicators align to the thematic findings from the research in this study. Competency 6, Indicator ‘I’ explains that school leaders are “facilitating access to resources, agencies and experts within and outside the school community to enhance student learning and development” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). Additionally, Indicator ‘D’ describes that leaders are “facilitating mentorship and induction supports for teachers and principals, as required” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). When teachers express their need for access to resources as it relates to their professional inquiry, school leaders have the ability to respond through maintaining a high-quality learning environment for all students. Again, Donohoo and Katz (2017) explained that “[s]chool leaders also ensure that professional learning keeps up the necessary rhythm and discipline of the collaborative inquiry cycle” (p. 26). Through facilitating induction and mentorship supports, and ensuring access to agencies, experts, and relevant resources, school leaders demonstrate their support for teacher inquiry, professional learning, and growth.

**Collaboration.** Overwhelmingly, respondents to the research questions in this study emphasized the importance of collaboration to teachers’ experiences with inquiry-based learning

and growth. A collaborative approach toward education – through teaching, learning, and living each day in school – is one that school leaders can positively influence through relationships, school culture, and intentional decision making. As Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) explained it, “as educators work together to find the answers to their questions, they uncover or develop the evidence of the extent to which they are achieving their goals. It’s an educative approach” (p. 16). Through the *Leadership Quality Standard*, competency 3 states that “[a] leader collaborates with the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being” (Alberta Education 2018a, p. 3). Within this competency, Indicator ‘D’ is particularly relevant as it explains that school leaders are “supporting school community members, including school councils, in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). School leaders collaborate with members of the school community when they focus on supporting those roles and responsibilities that teachers have. One responsibility – developing an annual inquiry-based professional growth plan – is an important priority for both individual teacher growth, and school wide coherence and alliance to the educational plan.

The seventh competency of the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) is entitled Developing Leadership Capacity. Within this competency, Indicator ‘E’ describes that a leader promotes “team building and shared leadership among members of the school community” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 5). Analogies of ‘team building’ within education are very common; however, when a school leader is tasked with promoting team building and shared leadership, the association to collaboration is unmistakable. According to Adams and Townsend (2014), “effective leaders promoted and supported the formation and development of teams of teachers in response to needs identified through the collaborative inquiry process” (para 31).

Efforts that school leaders make in terms of connecting people, facilitating relationships, and finding common ground within the school community, will typically sustain an end-in-mind of future collaboration. The world of education moves quickly, and school leaders that have a future goal of collaboration for the purpose of learning, are responding to both teacher and community need.

Finally, competency 4, entitled Leading a Learning Community, indicates that “[a] leader nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). The competency explains, through Indicator ‘E’ that leaders are “creating meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). This indicator of effective leadership competency strongly connects to what teachers describe as necessary to supporting positive experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Through expressing their perspectives and lived experiences within this study, teachers strongly advocate for collaborative learning opportunities within their professional settings. DuFour and Marzano (2009) insisted that “there is abundant evidence that organizing people into teams in which they work together to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable is a powerful structure for promoting individual and collective accountability” (p. 67). School leaders who emphasize and prioritize the creation of meaningful collaborative learning opportunities for staff will closely align to what teachers in this study indicate is beneficial to their success with inquiry-based learning and growth. When those efforts are paired with time spent listening to the celebrations, concerns, and questions that teachers bring forward, a truly collaborative and responsive culture will grow within the learning community.

**Reflection.** The sixth major thematic finding gleaned from respondents to this research

study was the importance of reflection. Within this discussion of school-based leadership competencies, those most closely aligned to the importance of reflection are situated within competency 3, Embodying Visionary Leadership. This third competency of the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) broadly explains that “[a] leader collaborates within the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). Teachers participating in this research study would agree in the importance of this leadership competency as it relates to their experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth. As Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) contended, “[a]n essential requisite of generative leadership is the ability and willingness of leaders to model reflection in their own practice, as well as to foster a culture of reflection in the organizations they lead” (p. 128). Indicator ‘F’ insists that competent school leaders are “accessing, sharing and using a range of data to determine progress towards achieving goals” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). Teachers expressed similar ideas within their experiences, indicating that reflecting on student needs, previous learning, future aspirations, and the goals of the learning community, are all priorities when making plans for inquiry-based growth. At many stages of the reflection and inquiry process, the use of feedback from a range of data most certainly guides reporting on progress and determining next steps.

Another indicator within competency 3 closely demonstrates the relationship between school leadership and the value of reflection. Indicator ‘A’ explains that school leaders are “communicating a philosophy of education that is student-centred and based on sound principles of effective teaching and leadership” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). As an effective learning team, teachers and school leaders align themselves to approaches that are student-centred and

they approach decision-making through lenses that include best practices in teaching and leading. School leaders also communicate a philosophy of education that, through reflection and offering feedback, they situate within other contextual factors including the school community, family and student need, school division priorities, societal considerations, and the growth of teachers. According to Townsend and Adams (2016), “[t]he purpose of feedback is to provide constructive information to help people become aware of how their behaviour impacts others, or their own performance” (p. 12). The authors also explained that “[i]t is important to give feedback in a way that will not be threatening to colleagues and, possibly, increase their defensiveness” (Townsend & Adams, 2016, p. 12). Teachers, as primary stakeholders in effective teaching and school-based leadership, are also active participants in this important reflection through school-based professional learning, staff meetings, department or grade level discussions, and the multiple other ways that teachers lead in school communities. The shared belief in – and communication of – a vision for the preferred future of a school community requires continuous reflection from the team.

A third and final indicator from competency 3, Indicator ‘E’, explains that school leaders are focused on “promoting innovation, enabling positive change and fostering commitment of continuous improvement” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). This indicator of school leadership competency most succinctly expresses teacher sentiment within this research. Teachers value the innovation that flows from ideal conditions for inquiry-based learning and growth, and teachers astutely understand the delicate balance required to create the conditions in which this vision thrives. When school leaders focus on creating the conditions that enable positive change, they continuously reflect on the progress of the school community in moving toward that change. By engaging teachers and listening to their ideas for positive change, school leaders gain insight into

what is needed to sustain the momentum across the community. Teacher inquiry and professional learning plans are also key drivers of positive change within the school; leaders will take note of which inquiry questions and plans align and contribute to the necessary reflection, growth, and change. The commitment to continuous improvement is perhaps at the core of what teachers express about their deep value for inquiry-based learning and growth; simultaneously, teachers want to work with school leaders who also value this commitment. Adams and Townsend (2014) asserted that “[s]chools in [their] research also showed the capacity to create more functional teams, confirming that shared leadership grows in a culture of collaboration driven by purposeful inquiry” (para 31). Through an ongoing reflection on what teachers require to continuously improve (relationships, identity, autonomy, resources, collaboration, and reflection), school leaders demonstrate their commitment to their teacher colleagues, and they sow the seeds of ongoing school improvement.

**Competencies 5 & 9.** Within this discussion of the recommendations and implications for school leaders, only two of the nine competencies were not discussed in some way. Competency 5, Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit is an all-encompassing leadership attribute that should necessarily find itself always permeating the work of school leaders. This overarching competency, with its associated indicators of achievement, will find itself elevated through the anti-racist and anti-oppressive efforts of school leaders who emphasize and honour the ongoing work of reconciliation. Although this discussion does not align competency 5 to any specific thematic findings from the present research, it is acknowledged how important this competency is to the ongoing learning, growth, and active transformation of contemporary learning communities in Alberta. Competency 9 is entitled Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context.

Although this discussion avoids aligning any of the competency 9 indicators to the broader thematic findings from the research, there are connections to be made with teachers' experiences. Overall, readers are encouraged to consider the data and research on teachers' experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth considering each competency and indicator; surely new connections will be gleaned. One final recommendation would be that readers explore the most relevant quality standard associated to their position in the education system (*Teaching Quality Standard*, Alberta Education, 2018c; *Leadership Quality Standard*, Alberta Education, 2018a; *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard*, Alberta Education, 2018b), and how it aligns to the experiences of teachers in this research study.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The research findings in this study are not broadly generalizable in the same sense that quantitative data would be. There are limitations to the extent to which teachers' experiences from this relatively small, qualitative, phenomenological study can inform general statements and assertions related to the primary research question. Other important limitations to acknowledge relate to the methodology of the study. While it was a requirement that participants identified having had prior experiences with inquiry-based professional learning (Appendix A), one could argue that participants joined the study because they in some way value or positively regard inquiry-based professional learning. Future research would be right to address this distinction because it may influence research findings by inadvertently overlooking the participation of potential participants who do not value inquiry-based professional learning, or who have negative experiences with the process.

Another methodological consideration to address would be whether or not all participants accept or understand common definitions of inquiry and inquiry-based professional learning. At

the start of each of the nine interviews, a common script was read to each participant (Appendix C) that included brief descriptions of collaborative inquiry and inquiry itself. Although participants had an opportunity to ask questions before the interview commenced, it must be acknowledged that participants bring their own inherent experiences, understandings, and perhaps even unique definitions of inquiry to the research. Despite the limitations of generalizing the data in this study, there was never an expectation of presenting broadly applicable results aside from what can be learned through the lived experiences of teachers willing to volunteer their time to share their thoughts and perspectives. There are interesting and compelling implications for future research that can be presently discussed, allowing for next steps in either narrowing, or widening, perspective and scope based on the qualitative phenomenological research shared in this study.

One very straightforward recommendation for future research would be to broaden the scope of the data gathering to include more teacher participants and respondents to the interview opportunities. With more teachers participating in the process, a larger pool of data will be generated from the research. Although in a phenomenological study more data will not necessarily correlate to broader generalization of results, the perspectives and experiences of more teachers may lead to further insights from researchers. A drawback of widening the interview pool is the amount of time required to analyse data, create individual case synopses, and write up general condensations based on teachers' experiences. Broadening the scope to include more interviews would require a much larger team than one graduate student researcher.

Another implication for future research that might be considered is going deeper into considering the years of teaching experience categories delineated within the methodology of this study. For example, a future research study could plan to isolate just one specific group of



teachers based on their years of teaching experience (in this case, 0-5, 6-14, or 15+ years of experience), for the purpose of determining unique data related to stage of career in education. Although this study considered years of teaching experience and stage of career when selecting participants and writing general condensations from the data, no attempt was made to formally compare or contrast the responses along these demographic lines. Comparing and contrasting the research results from within each group of participants (based on years of teaching experience) would almost illuminate new findings. In this study, for the purpose of general condensations, and drawing general conclusions, no dissimilarities or contrast was explored. Future research could either focus specifically on a targeted group based on their years of teaching experience or go further into comparing demographically different groups of teachers based on stage of career.

Beyond years of teaching experience, demographic aspects of teachers' identities were not considered within the scope of this current study. Because of this, future research could be structured to include potentially important demographic information such as: age of participant; gender and gender expression of participant; racial, ethnic, and cultural background of participant; sexual orientation of participant; or any other uniquely identifying and potentially illuminating aspect of teacher demographics. Due to the importance of intersectional research practices, the acknowledgement of individual identity, and the complexities of our modern society, demographic considerations beyond years of teaching experience may be important research avenues to consider alongside the primary research question of this study.

Implications for future research could further consider the six general themes gleaned from chapter four of this study: relationships, identity, autonomy, resources, collaboration, and reflection. Because these general thematic considerations emerged through the phenomenological research process in this study, further exploration of these themes might test

them against more data gathered based on teachers' experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Future research could attempt to explore all six themes illuminated through this study, or it could isolate and amplify those aspects of the findings that spark curiosity in the researcher or connect to other prescient contemporary research. For example, much is written about the role of relationships in education. The potential exists for future research to isolate this theme and continue focusing on the roles that relationships play within teachers' experiences of inquiry, professional learning, and growth. Any one of the six themes gleaned from this study could be considered for launching its own qualitative phenomenological research premise surrounding teachers' lived experiences.

Finally, the relationship between the primary research question of this study could be considered against the roles of school-based leaders, and leadership teams, and teachers' experiences. This important dynamic could inform future research as it relates to teachers' experiences with inquiry-based professional learning and growth, and what influence school leaders have within this domain. To broaden the research, division leadership teams could be included within a more general consideration of "educational leadership," or a system-wide approach to the discussion of teachers and leaders could be explored considering the primary research question in this study. Regardless of the possible implication of future research that follows this study, there is no doubt that stakeholders like school-based leaders, division administration, ministry and government officials, regional consortia representatives, and members of professional associations, would be interested in learning more or considering research results within their unique and specific contexts.

## Conclusion

Teachers in Alberta create annual growth plan documents that outline their intentions to participate in professional growth. The creation of these documents is outlined and mandated in both legislation and procedure (Alberta, 2015) and, while the themes of learning are diverse, the purpose of the documentation is to “to ensure that each teacher’s actions, judgments and decisions are in the best educational interests of students and support optimum learning” (Alberta, 2015, para 1). The purpose of this study was to better understand teachers’ personal lived experiences as they have undertaken inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Using a phenomenological method, this study sought to answer the question: What is the role of inquiry in teachers’ experiences of professional learning and growth? By directly interviewing practicing teachers, descriptive explanations of the phenomena in question were developed. The overarching objective of this study was to illuminate the personal lived experiences of practicing teachers as those phenomena relate to the teachers’ use of inquiry to inform professional learning and growth.

Within this qualitative phenomenological research, nine participants were interviewed. These participants were chosen based on criteria including willingness to participate, availability of time, and years of teaching experience. The nine interview transcripts were synthesized into individual cases synopses before being considered broadly as part of general condensations based on years of teaching experience. In all, nine interview transcripts, nine individual case synopses, and three general condensations were produced for the purpose of revealing what is essential to the role of inquiry in teachers’ experiences of professional learning and growth. Thematic findings, determined through the phenomenological processes described earlier,

yielded six salient themes in response to the research question: relationships, identity, autonomy, resources, collaboration, and reflection.

Implications for future research related to this study were thoughtfully considered and proposed. In a straightforward sense, future research could establish itself within the same research question while broadening the scope to include more participants in the process. In a similar vein, important future research could choose to focus on one of the three years of experience categories for its own in-depth study (e.g., replicating this research study but with teachers with 0-5 years' experience only). Future research related to teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth would do well to consider the personally relevant demographic indicators of teachers themselves. As an example, future researchers could choose to explore the racial, ethnic, or cultural background of participants, or any other unique and personally important demographic aspect of teacher identity. Future research might explore a further consideration of one or more of the six general themes emerging as salient for the participants in this research study (relationships, identity, autonomy, resources, collaboration, or reflection). Finally, the question of the role of educational leadership could be further explored within the context of the research themes presently in question. A further exploration of what reveals, and is essential to, the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth alongside the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders (whether school-based, division-based, or institutionally embedded [regional consortia, professional association, or governmental]), could be relevant and illuminating.

Important contributions to the field of educational leadership research are represented by this study. As noted earlier, administrative teachers in Alberta (principals, vice-principals, assistant principals) and current school-based leaders were excluded from this research study.

The work of verifying the part-time teaching workload of a school-based administrator was beyond the scope of this study. That being said, strong connections to the Alberta *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) were shared alongside the relevant indicators and descriptors that align closely to the thematic findings suggested by research participants, and discussion of the significance for practicing school leaders is presented. In reading and considering the value of this study, educational leaders might explore the six general themes within two major aspects of their practice as colleagues, mentors, and leaders: the *who*; and, the *how*. It was learned that participants in this research identified three key themes essential to the role of inquiry in their experiences of professional learning and growth: relationships, identity, and autonomy. These three findings are also core to who participants are as individuals and professionals (the *who*). This research also illuminated three key themes that directly related to how inquiry is fostered for participants in the study: resources, collaboration, and reflection. These findings are essential to how participants explain the role of inquiry in their experiences of professional learning and growth (the *how*). Educational leaders reading this research study are encouraged to consider in what ways the *who*, and the *how*, of these thematic findings reveal what is essential to their own leadership practice of supporting inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth.

This study focused on the lived experiences of participants in a mid-sized urban school division located in Alberta, Canada. The primary research question was: What is the role of inquiry in teachers' experiences of professional learning and growth? The data analysis and findings from this study exposed what was essential to the role of inquiry in the experiences participants shared. Thematic findings from individual synopses and general condensations revealed six general themes and related common thematic characteristics: Relationships

(upholding relationships; seeking and creating community; encouraging dialogue with colleagues); Identity (connecting to inquiry; valuing diversity; engaging in meaningful ways); Autonomy (maintaining autonomy; overcoming workload; withstanding pressure); Resources (accessing time; supporting inquiry; sustaining learning and growth); Collaboration (appreciating collaboration; endorsing collaborative communities; connecting inquiry and collaboration); and, Reflection (cycling through inquiry; gathering feedback; prioritizing reflection).

Participants in this research study shared innumerable insights into what is essential to the role of inquiry in their experiences of professional learning and growth. The deep value and importance of participant contributions to this research cannot be overstated. As Schaefer and Clandinin (2019) described it:

Knowledge for teachers is knowledge that is considered by others as important knowledge for teachers to have; knowledge itself is considered an object, as something to possess or hold and that can be transferred to teachers. Teacher knowledge is the embodied narrative knowledge that lives within teachers and is expressed in their practices. Teacher knowledge is composed by teachers in and through their life experiences, in school and out of school, over time, place and relationships. (p. 62)

Reflecting on the value of learning and its role within his inquiry, participant Anthony Hall noted that “we have limited time with students, we have limited resources with students. They have limited time; they have limited resources. So how do we learn as much as we can in that limited time we have?” Another participant, Alexandra Houghton, valued the strong relationship between teacher inquiry and inquiry-in-action within her classroom. Alexandra explained that inquiry “feels really good as a teacher and there’s so many things right now that are so hard...this is something that can really become a part of the room and it is really exciting for

both you and the students.” Participants in this study found ways to express experiences that were entirely professional, and yet altogether personal; their contributions to the research were wholesome and sincere. Participant Rosalie Baxter succinctly described her inquiry when she stated: “...make it matter to me and I’ll be more interested.” Putting a finer point on her beliefs, Rosalie insisted that “if my inquiry question is something that matters to me, is a matter of my heart...then I’m going to dig right in and I’m going to learn about that.”

The experiences shared through this study align closely to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) when they explained that “in every classroom where teachers are learners and all learners are teachers, there is a radical, but quiet, kind of school reform in process” (p. 318). The essential relationships that exist within teaching, learning, and leading through inquiry, have the potential to generate positive outcomes for the most important demographic in education: the students who enter our schools each day. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) revealed that “the commitment of teacher researchers is change—in their own classrooms, schools, districts, and professional organizations. At the base of this commitment is a deep and often passionately enacted responsibility to students’ learning and life chances” (p. 318). To this end and many others, when teachers find a deep and impassioned commitment to students’ learning and life chances, the true purpose of education is unveiled and laid bare: hope for the future.

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## Appendix A

### Teachers' Experiences with Inquiry-Based Professional Learning

The survey contains five short questions and will take approximately five minutes to complete. You will be asked to respond to questions that will determine your suitability for participation in an interview about inquiry-based professional learning as you have personally experienced it. Skipping a question will disqualify you from the study because I will not have the basic information necessary to determine your candidacy for participation.

The last question will ask if you can commit to an interview with the researcher (approximately 60 minutes) on the research topic. If you answer 'no', you will not be selected for the study.

Participation is voluntary. Your responses may lead you to being personally identified as you are being asked to submit your name and email address for the express purpose of me contacting you about next steps. The survey does collect identifying information, and as with any online survey, neither anonymity nor confidentiality can be completely guaranteed.

You may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled by simply closing your browser before you submit your responses and they will not be included.

This research study has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee.

\*Note: If for some reason you are not contacted for an interview and would like more information about why you were not contacted, or the results of this research, please contact: [aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca)

1. What is your name?

2. What is the email address that you prefer to be contacted at?

3. Currently, or in the past, have you had experiences with inquiry-based professional learning?

- Yes
- No

4. For how many years have you been teaching? Please select the one answer that best represents your teaching experience to-date.

- 0-5 years
- 6-14 years
- 15+ years

5. By submitting this survey you indicate that you wish to be contacted for a follow-up interview with the researcher. This interview will be approximately 60 minutes in length, and it will be on the topic of your personal experiences with inquiry-based professional learning. Submission of a response of 'yes' will be accepted as implied consent to participate, and for the researcher to contact you to schedule an interview. Submission of a response of 'no' will end your participation in this study. Thank you in advance for your participation.

- Yes
- No

## Appendix B

Email Subject Line: Univ. of Lethbridge Study – Teachers’ Experiences with Inquiry-Based Professional Learning

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Aaron Fitchett and I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. I am currently studying teachers’ experiences with inquiry-based professional learning. You are receiving this email because you completed an online survey entitled Teachers’ Experiences with Inquiry-Based Professional Learning, and you indicated you would be available to commit to be an interview participant for this study.

Every effort will be made to keep your participation in this study confidential. Your name and email address will not be revealed in any publications; however, some non-identifying information, including the number of years of teaching experience you have at the time of being interviewed, will become part of the research study. There are no anticipated risks to taking part in this interview and you can stop at any time.

If you have any questions about the study or are interested in the findings, you may contact me at [aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca) or 403-360-6993. You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Lethbridge at [research.services@uleth.ca](mailto:research.services@uleth.ca) or 403-329-2747 if you have questions about your rights as a participant. This research has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participants Research Committee.

If you would be interested in participating in a one-on-one (online, if preferred) interview with me, please respond to this email, or contact me at the telephone number provided.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Aaron Fitchett  
Graduate Student  
University of Lethbridge  
403-360-6993  
[aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca)

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol (Teachers' Experiences with Inquiry-Based Professional Learning)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Informed Consent Completed?: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. My name is Aaron and today I would like to interview you about professional experiences that are personal to you as teacher. The duration of the interview should be approximately 45 – 60 minutes. This interview will be audio recorded so that I can obtain an accurate transcript of your experiences. Every effort will be made to keep your participation in this study confidential, and with your permission, I will take some notes during the interview.

The following questions have been written with the aim of discovering your personal experiences with inquiry as a tool for professional growth planning, supporting professional learning, and informing your practice as an in-service teacher in Alberta. Embedded within this study is a further curiosity about whether stage of teaching career (i.e., years of teaching experience) influences your personal experiences with inquiry. I am interviewing three teachers who indicated they are in their first five years of teaching, three teachers with 6-14 years of experience, and three teachers with 15 or more years of teaching experience, for a total of nine interviews. I am not curious about any other demographic information at this time, but please speak freely as you will.

The purpose of this study is to better understand teachers' personal lived experiences as they have undertaken inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Embedded within the education system in Alberta is the expectation that teachers engage in ongoing professional

learning and development throughout their career. Researchers describe a collaborative inquiry process as one that “begins when a group of educators commits to exploring and answering a compelling question about a chosen element of professional practice, followed by a cycle of examination, experimentation, exploration, and public reflection” (Townsend and Adams, 2009, p. 43). Other researchers use the term ‘inquiry’ quite broadly to include aspects of action research, practitioner research, classroom research, and practitioner inquiry, all the while emphasizing the relatedness of these processes “to represent administrators’ and teachers’ systematic study of their own practice” (Dana, 2009, p. 6). This study presumes that what is meant by professional development is more closely aligned to a passive model of knowledge transition from a knowledge holder (aka. expert, who does the developing) to a knowledge receiver (aka. learner, who is developed). Within this study, the process of inquiry will be described in both collaborative and individual contexts, but always as teacher-centered and with the understanding that teacher inquiry can lead to learning and reform in education (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). It is not a goal of this study to critique inquiry-based models of professional learning and growth. I encourage you to speak freely and to focus your responses on your personal experiences. Are you still willing to participate in this interview? Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Introduction:   | a. To start the interview off, please describe your current  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read through the introduction to the Interview Protocol</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teaching assignment, and if possible, describe the pathway you took to where you are now.</li> <li>• What are your total years of teaching experience?</li> </ul> |
-

- 
- Confirm verbal consent to proceed
  - How many years have you been at your current school?
  - What types of schools have you worked at?
  - What types of teaching positions have you held?
  - What types of contracts have you held?
- 

- Possible verbal probes:
- What was that like for you?
  - Can you compare those two experiences?
- b. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry as it relates to you as a teacher.
- What experiences do you have with inquiry as it relates to other teachers in your school or division?
  - What experiences do you have with inquiry as it relates to teachers in other jurisdictions?
  - If you have worked in another jurisdiction, what experiences did you have with inquiry as it related to your teaching role there?
- 

- Possible verbal probes:
- Can you tell more about that?
  - What was that experience like?
  - What impact did that have on you?
- c. Describe your personal experiences with the role that inquiry plays in your professional learning.
- What experiences have you had with inquiry approaches being offered through conferences or workshops you have attended?
  - What other experiences have you had with an inquiry approach to professional learning, or more traditionally, professional development?
-



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Possible verbal probes:

- Can you describe that for me?
- Can you provide some examples?
- Can you give me more details about that?

d. Describe your personal experiences with the role that

professional inquiry plays in your professional growth plan.

- Is an inquiry-based model one that you use to develop your professional growth plan?
- In what ways do you experience an inquiry-based approach to creating, living out, and reflecting on your professional growth plan?

---

Possible verbal probes:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- What was that like for you?
- What was the outcome of that?

e. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry as it plays a role in professional learning throughout your school.

- What are your experiences with collaborative inquiry within your school?
- What are your experiences working with other teachers to answer an inquiry question?
- What are your experiences with inquiry-based learning as a school-wide professional learning approach?

---

Possible verbal probes:

- Can you provide some examples?

f. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry-based

professional learning compared to your experiences with more traditional professional development activities.

---

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Possible verbal probes:      g. Describe your personal experiences with inquiry-based professional growth plans versus more traditional goal-based teacher professional growth plans.

- Tell me more about that.

---

Possible verbal probes:      h. Describe a time when you thought using an inquiry-based approach to professional learning did, or did not, assist you in fulfilling the objectives of your growth plan.

- Can you tell me about the outcome of that?
  - What experiences have you had when inquiry-based approaches to growth and learning were not helpful to you?
- Why do you think that is?
  - What experiences have you had when inquiry-based approaches to growth and learning were helpful to you?
- Can you provide an example?

---

Closing:      i. Finally, please describe the experiences you have had that make you believe that inquiry has had an influence on your teaching practice.

- Additional comments?
- Thank participant

---

## Appendix D

### Letter of Consent

Study Title: Teachers' Experiences with Inquiry-Based Professional Learning

MMMMM DD, YYYY

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study on the role that inquiry plays in teachers' professional learning and growth. The purpose of my research is to learn about how teachers personally experience inquiry-based professional learning in their current contexts. The information collected from this study will be presented in a master's thesis, in addition to other scholarly publications and presentations (no personal identification will be disclosed).

This research will require about 60 minutes of your time for a one-on-one interview at a time and location of mutual agreement, which could include an online meeting. During this time, you will be interviewed about your experiences with inquiry, and the role that inquiry has played in your own professional learning. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission. With your permission, I will take some written notes during the interview.

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study; however, you will be contributing to a better understanding of the ways in which inquiry-based professional learning influences your growth planning.

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts related to this research. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. You may choose to not answer any question, or you may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. While the initial transcription of the interview will be done by a third-party transcription service, I will retain the original audio-recording and all subsequent versions of the written transcripts. All the data collected in this study will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected computer, and only I will have access to them. The transcript will be edited to remove any personal identifying information. The audio-recording will not be used for any purpose other than data collection. The transcript and audio-recording will be deleted two years after data collection has been completed. The thesis and any other presentations will not contain any mention of your name and pseudonyms will be used for any quotations used.

The results from this study will be presented in scholarly publications and presentations. At no time, however, will your name be used, or any identifying information revealed unless you have given consent. If you wish to receive a summary of the results from this study, you may contact me at [aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca).

If you require any additional information about this study, please call me at 403-360-6993 or email me at [aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca). You may also contact my co-supervisors, Dr. Pamela Adams, at (403) 332-4070 or [adams@uleth.ca](mailto:adams@uleth.ca), or Dr. Carmen Mombourquette, at (403) 329-2018 or [carmen.mombourquette@uleth.ca](mailto:carmen.mombourquette@uleth.ca). Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or Email: [research.services@uleth.ca](mailto:research.services@uleth.ca)).

This research project has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee. Thank you for your consideration.

I agree to the audio-recording of the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Printed Name of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

I have read (or have been read) the above information regarding this research study on teachers' experiences with inquiry-based professional learning, and consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Printed Name of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Printed Name of Researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

Aaron Fitchett  
Graduate Student  
University of Lethbridge  
403-360-6993  
[aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca)

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

## Appendix E

### Letter of Invitation: Online Survey

Email subject line: Univ. of Lethbridge Study – Teachers’ Experiences with Inquiry-Based Professional Learning

Please read the following letter of information carefully before beginning the survey:

***Principal Investigator:*** Aaron Fitchett, graduate student (Master of Education - Educational Leadership), University of Lethbridge

#### ***What is this study about?***

You are invited to participate in a survey of in-service teachers in your school division in Lethbridge, Alberta. This is a research study of the experiences of practicing teachers with inquiry-based professional learning. Through your participation in this survey, I hope to determine candidacy for a follow-up, audio-recorded interview, that would last approximately 60 (sixty) minutes. I am seeking participants with various years of teaching experience, so you will be asked to know how long you have been teaching for (0-5years, 6-14 years, or 15+ years). This invitation to participate is being extended to teachers in School Division. This survey is intended to remain open for two full weeks, or until the maximum responses (40) is reached. Nine participants will be selected for an interview based on criteria outlined in the study (willingness to participate, years of teaching experience, in-service teacher without administrative duties, relationship to researcher); if more than the minimum response is generated, participants will be chosen by a random drawing of names.

#### ***What is expected of you?***

The survey contains five short questions and will take approximately five minutes to complete. You will be asked to respond to questions that will determine your suitability for participation in

an interview about inquiry-based professional learning as you have experienced it. Skipping a question will disqualify you from the study because I will not have the basic information necessary to determine your candidacy for participation. The last question will ask if you can commit to an interview (approximately 60 minutes in length) with the researcher on the research topic. If you answer 'no', you will not be selected for the study.

***What are the anticipated uses of the data collected?***

The responses to the survey will be used to determine eligibility to participate in an interview with the researcher of this study. The findings of this survey may also be published in scholarly presentations and publications, but no personally identifying information (e.g., your name, email address) will be published. Your name and email address are being collected for contact purposes only.

***What are the risks and benefits of participating?***

There are no anticipated risks from participating in this study. There are no direct benefits from participating although you may gain some insight into what your own experiences are.

***How will your confidentiality and anonymity be protected?***

Participation is voluntary. Your responses may lead you to being personally identified as you are being asked to submit your name and email address for the express purpose of me contacting you about next steps. The survey does collect identifying information, and as with any online survey, neither anonymity nor confidentiality can be completely guaranteed. The survey is being hosted on Survey Monkey and their privacy policy can be accessed at

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/legal/privacy-policy/>

The responses to this survey will be kept on a password-protected computer with restricted access and will be deleted two years after data collection has been completed.

***How can a participant withdraw?***

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled by simply closing your browser before you submit your responses, and they will not be included.

***Who is conducting this research?***

For more information on this study or for a summary of the findings (available after July 2021), you may contact me at [aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca](mailto:aaron.fitchett@uleth.ca) or 403-360-6993. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or Email: [research.services@uleth.ca](mailto:research.services@uleth.ca)).

This research study has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee.

You must be 18 years or older to participate in this survey.

If you wish to participate in the survey, please proceed to the questions now at [*insert URL here*].

Submission of your responses will be accepted as implied consent to participate. Thank you in advance for your participation.



## Appendix F

### Individual Synopsis

**Kylie Blake: 0-5 years of teaching.** With five years of teaching experience, Kylie Blake is a full-time teacher and has been employed in two school divisions. In her current school division, she has worked in one school but has held a variety of types of contracts. Kylie did not grow up thinking she was going to be a teacher or an educator; however, she comes from a long line of teachers with all four of her grandparents having been teachers. During her undergraduate studies, Kylie was part of a small cohort of people – her programming was rigorous, and she developed strong relationships with her fellow students. Throughout her broad experiences before entering the teaching profession, Kylie describes her personal motivation, drive, determination, and perseverance, as being key factors to her success.

Because she was new to the profession when an inquiry approach to professional learning and growth was introduced and modeled at her school, Kylie felt she had an advantage in that she “was naturally inquisitive about everything”. Kylie believes that professional learning carries more meaning than professional development, and that the learning facilitates the development. In her experience today, inquiry-based professional learning is “much more meaningful, but it’s also probably a lot – requires a lot more work and maybe a lot more effort, perhaps.” Typically, events in her life start her on her own learning journey. Kylie describes an experience where her focus for learning has taken her outside of her school, division, and community, and that she realizes “I’ve done that myself, but that has all informed my role as a teacher.” Kylie explains that her contemporary inquiry is the essential foundation for her learning, processing, and sense of being as a professional. At a certain point in her career, Kylie began to wonder if her experiences with inquiry were unique and not actually the norm.

Kylie believes that inquiry learning is very naturally part of what she does. She indicates that an inquiry approach is “just everything I do and continue to do.” Kylie describes that her past inquiries influence her current practice; she recalls that it “continues to inform my teaching...What I learned two years ago, what I explored, what I tried, continues to grow.” Kylie approaches inquiry-based professional learning as a practice to fully invest in; she wonders how to maximize all the things that can be done with time focused on professional learning. Engaging in a process of reflection and questioning prompts Kylie to consider her professional learning goal and whether she has accomplished it, or if it should continue into the future.

Kylie believes that having the personal autonomy to inquire leads to making choices and seeking opportunities which leads to caring more about the outcome and a deeper personal investment. She indicates that when inquiry is driven by teachers themselves, “you own it”. Kylie believes that inquiring teachers own their learning, and she seeks out new opportunities when she needs them. She describes that “I found myself seeking a community last year that I didn’t have. I needed support and I wanted to keep learning.” Kylie believes in being mindful of external factors attempting to influence the direction of her professional learning; she is committed to doing her own learning, insisting “no one was going to do it for me.” At Kylie’s school, opportunities to share inquiry learning are valued, and she explains that “I think that when we witness each other’s inquiry, learning what we’re struggling with, what we’re learning, it helps us all.” In turn, Kylie values the opportunity to create communities of teacher inquirers in her school division. She explains that so much of teaching are the roles, tasks, and mandates that must be completed, and she contrasts this with the autonomy to choose a learning direction. To Kylie, “having your own direction to spend your energy...is something that refuels and inspires and motivates”. There is an essential connection between lifelong learning, successful teaching,

and the role that inquiry plays at her school. Because of these things, Kylie says, “people feel quite motivated”.

At Kylie’s school, teachers share their growth plans and inquiry questions with each other. They discuss what they are aiming to do, and she describes collaborative relationships that are focused on mutual support. To Kylie, professional learning opportunities are shared, meaningful experiences - collaboration is ongoing for Kylie, and she has many meaningful experiences with the process. She recalls a time when she shared her growth plan with a family member (a veteran teacher) who works in another school division. This person was surprised to learn that at Kylie’s school, professional growth plans are shared and discussed freely. At times, Kylie wonders about the best ways to collaborate and share the results of her professional inquiry. She questions: “How do I show it to someone who needs [it]? How do I show it to someone else?”

Kylie sees part of her professional inquiry as reaching out to discover what experiences she can have or who she can talk to. One way that Kylie sees herself being influenced by inquiry learning is that she joins other groups of teachers to share and collaborate. It is one of her goals to collaborate with teachers at other sites as her school year progresses. Kylie has shared her professional learning aims to educator groups online, and she will express in detail her hopes for her annual professional growth plan with educators she meets virtually. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kylie reached out online and joined 50 other educators (primarily from across Alberta) to virtually assemble one night to talk and share. Reaching out to other educators online has led to Kylie joining a Canada-wide group that meets twice monthly. From her experiences online, Kylie recalls she “ended up joining a group of Canadian-wide teachers. We get together every two weeks, twice a month on Tuesday nights.” Kylie explains, “that’s one of the things

that has happened to me because I put out a message online.” Kylie participates in a division initiative allowing teachers to create their own collaborative communities. She sees this opportunity as one that allows collaboration—rooted in experiences—to happen amongst schools across the division. Kylie shares an experience when she became very good friends with a teaching colleague through their mutual collaboration. During the shared collaboration, Kylie describes learning a lot from her colleague. Kylie invited this teacher into her classroom on many occasions, and she explains that this was an experience that developed through her inquiry.

Although she knows this might not be the experience in all schools, Kylie describes starting her career at a growth-centred school. Her only experiences with a professional growth plan have been framed through an inquiry model. Kylie explains that “[a]ll of my growth plans have been through an inquiry model, guided by admin at the school I work at”. At Kylie’s school there is an annual process (beginning in August), extending through the first semester to a professional learning day in November, and continuing to a check-in point sometime during the spring. Kylie explains that she works at a growth mindset school, and she says that aiming to inquire is at the heart of their learning. Staff will ask reflective questions that are meant to drive growth, and inquiry is central to what they are doing. Kylie describes that one-on-one meetings happen with her school administrators. Teachers share what they are aiming toward, their professional inquiry for the year, and share what their learning might look like. Inquiry-based professional learning is intentionally guided by the administrators at Kylie’s school. She associates this with what she describes as establishing growth-based learning plans, or growth-based professional goals for the school year. This process becomes a source of inquiry.

Describing her experiences with the role that inquiry plays in professional learning, Kylie explains that with the support of her administrators, she has professional autonomy. To Kylie,

the foundation of this work is having a process for the school year and support for how a teacher begins to answer their inquiry questions. She sees this as the foundation of her professional learning. Kylie believes that in her teaching career, most of her experiences have been with professional learning as opposed to professional development. She thinks this is primarily due to the beliefs of the school where she works. Inquiry-based professional learning as a staff member has influenced Kylie's teaching experience. She explains that the work staff has done, guided by inquiry, has meant the "same intention has come into my assignments" for students. To Kylie, using inquiry-based approaches for professional learning has influenced her life as an educator. Kylie indicates that "if I didn't have the personal experiences I've had, essentially to risk, to fail, to grow, to inquire, which I think as educators is at the heart of what we do, I don't know if I would be as fulfilled in my job". She is not sure if she would be as excited to work, or to continue to inquire, without these experiences.

According to Kylie, inquiry-based professional learning is part of her job, and it goes hand-in-hand with teaching in her subject area. Kylie finds her school-based subject specialist department to be extremely collaborative; together they explore, create, and see their work through. She collaborates a lot within her school "on improving our ability to give feedback through process and that ultimately is the most important" to her. For Kylie, there is a connection between inquiry-based professional learning and her role as a subject area specialist. She believes it is a natural connection because what she is doing in her professional learning is what she aims for her students to do in their own learning. Past inquiry-based professional learning questions are carried forward in Kylie's practice. She incorporates these questions within the thinking process of her assignments for students. Kylie asks herself, "How can I make the authentic connections for students? That's one way I'm incorporating that". To Kylie, she is

responsible for doing her own learning in order to teach her students what is going on and why things are happening. Kylie believes that within her subject area, teachers want to help students to have an inquiry mindset with their learning.

For Kylie, there can be some inconsistency in how she knows—and can show—evidence of her inquiry-based professional growth plan in action. Because a lot of what she practices is qualitative, rather than quantitative, she asks herself “How can I show I’ve done this? How do we demonstrate that I’ve accomplished this?” Occasionally, Kylie questions the role of data and evidence collection in her professional inquiry process. She finds that watching the process of how her courses change is a form of anecdotal evidence, and she finds there is a lot of change. Kylie reflects that “I can tell I’m growing or helping because I’m seeing it happen in the learning.” That being said, she admits “to try to record that in terms of numbers, statistics, or a traditional mode when you do a non-traditional kind of exploration, that’s the struggle.” In the past, Kylie has been introduced to an inquiry-focused growth planning template, and she believes this tool is helpful in starting the inquiry process. Inquiry-based professional learning can develop at its own pace; Kylie indicates that a teacher may take a long time with one plan, or they might accomplish their learning goal quickly and then need to develop a new growth goal.

To Kylie, traditional professional development feels like a “one-off,” where there is not “time to process and explore and try”. She finds these experiences less meaningful compared to professional learning. Kylie worries that based on political factors in her province, teachers may face increasing directives within their profession and realize fewer opportunities to engage in inquiry. Kylie sees a shift provincially toward more “American-style education” with a focus on standardized testing. She mentions a current political concern, the provincial draft curriculum, and she has the fear that teachers will not be equipped to advocate for inquiry-based professional

learning time when they face learning an expanded curriculum. Kylie believes there may be forces bringing themselves into government decision-making at a provincial level that would devalue inquiry-based learning processes. Kylie wonders what professional growth planning is like for other teachers. She believes her process is experiential, and she questions whether it would be meaningful to do it any other way.

In the past when Kylie has reached out to collaborate with other educators online, she has encountered limitations. She explains that once she was seeking another classroom to collaborate with and connect her students to. Kylie was not able to find another educator who was doing the work she had already undertaken, so instead she helped share what was taking place in her classroom. All of her experiences with inquiry-based professional growth planning, at the school level, have been positive. She feels guided through the process, but admits it can be confusing at times, or sometimes you feel you might not have accomplished it. She indicates it is not a black-and-white process. Although Kylie believes inquiry-based professional learning has always helped her, she acknowledges there are times when it's a struggle, or frustrating for teachers, because it is not always easy. Kylie believes that people at the level of administration and superintendent are going to need to advocate for the importance of inquiry-based professional learning. She sees shifting happening within the education system and it worries her.

Kylie values professional learning over more traditional professional development activities. She describes a disconnect between prescriptive, directed PD opportunities and the work being done in classrooms. To Kylie, these two facets are not always aligned. Because she believes the inquiry process is experiential, she tries to anecdotally record her results. To overcome the challenge of demonstrating her achievement, Kylie decides to actually test out her learning in her classes, and to her this is not a theoretical process. She attempts new things with

her students and then she seeks feedback from them based on her teaching.

Kylie appreciates the inquiry-focused growth planning template (a guide and tool), that was introduced to her. In her experience, she adds to the planning document throughout the school year. She uses this tool to record what she is doing in different ways, and she uses the tool to reflect. It becomes a lens that she uses to make decisions. Kylie has had experiences where she has rewritten her inquiry question mid-year because her learning has taken a different direction from her original growth plan question or goal. Kylie believes that formulating an inquiry-based growth plan, in the form of a question, was possibly the hardest part of the process for her colleagues. Developing the language for inquiry was challenging. Kylie recalls that when the inquiry-focused professional growth plan process was introduced at her school, some colleagues struggled to phrase their goal as a question. In that sense, she thinks it may have become more difficult for people. Kylie explains that sometimes she has found that her inquiry question is actually unanswerable - that there is no actual easy answer, so you just have to attempt it. In the past, Kylie has tried to share some inquiry learning with colleagues from other subject disciplines, but she found this work to be difficult because it takes more time. At Kylie's school, time for shared collaboration is celebrated and supported, but difficulty arises when ideas are not on the same level or colleagues are not moving in the same direction.

Kylie describes the first mode that she translates the would through is one of an artist. She wonders "if my first response is always as a teacher or as a human, but it might actually be as an artist and a dancer." To Kylie, this means a sense of empathy, process, and creation, is present in her inquiry. As a teacher in her subject area, she believes in helping students "learn the choreography" of the teaching. Kylie speculates that her identity as a dancer plays a huge role in who she is as a teacher – perhaps more than she knows. Based on her own early life experiences,



Kylie identifies that her development as a dancer was through an inquiry of the body. Kylie sees her background as advantageous when it comes to inquiry-based professional learning, since inquiry is always at the root of dancing. Kylie's personal experience was one of exploration because of her life as a dancer. She believes this allows her a different facet that she sees everything through as a teacher.

To Kylie, choosing her own growth plan for the year, and using an inquiry mind-set, helps her feel inspired. She finds it is important to feel respected by other people, and to know that your administration supports you in knowing what's best for you to focus on. Kylie sees a parallel between teacher learning and student learning. She explains that if she directs her students in what to do, versus allowing them choice in what they study, the indicator is in their engagement and motivation. To Kylie, teachers are not different from students in this way. Through their experiences with inquiry playing a role in professional learning at her school, Kylie sees that teachers are quite proud of what they do. Colleagues are willing to share what they are trying in their classes, and she believes this democratizes learning for students and staff. Kylie believes that when her colleagues want to learn, and are excited by it, they are more likely to care about their work and to do a good job. Because she believes inquiry-based professional learning is so personally meaningful, she plans to keep advocating for it on behalf of the profession.

## Appendix G

### Individual Synopsis

**Charlotte Hayes: 0-5 years of teaching.** Charlotte Hayes is in her fifth year of teaching, and in these first years of her career she has worked in three different schools. Having held a variety of contract types within her school division, Charlotte has been offered full-time, part-time, online, and even last-minute contracts. A common thread among Charlotte's diverse experiences is that all three schools serve lower socioeconomic community and families. Charlotte has taught complex classes that include students with exceptional learning needs, varied family backgrounds, and divergent levels of parental involvement. There are several members of Charlotte's family who are teachers and who work in education. Growing up, Charlotte always knew she wanted to be a teacher, and she has positive memories of spending time in her mom's classroom as a child.

Through her subject specialization, Charlotte was introduced to inquiry-based methods while still an undergraduate and pre-service teacher. During her second teaching practicum experience, inquiry was a focus for Charlotte. Inquiry was a new concept to her at the time, and it was a lot to undertake. This introduction to inquiry was through the lens of assisting students to inquire within their own learning. During her pre-service teaching internship, Charlotte completed an inquiry project. To Charlotte, she has never really achieved her inquiry goals. She appreciates the opportunities to cycle through learning, growth, and reflection repeatedly. Charlotte believes there is no ending to an inquiry process. Anything aligned with Charlotte's inquiry question will naturally draw a greater investment from her. It feeds her curiosities. Charlotte recalls her colleagues having a steep learning curve with inquiry; however, she feels more comfortable because she already has a background with inquiry.

Charlotte's first year in her school division was the first year of a shift to inquiry-based professional growth plans. This format for developing professional growth plans is the only one Charlotte knows; she has no experiences with a more 'traditional' professional growth plan. In her career, Charlotte has taught in several schools, at several different grade levels. When she starts creating her growth plan at the start of each year, Charlotte reflects on what her experiences have been, what she knows about the curriculum of her current assignment, and where she believes she can grow. For two years now, Charlotte develops one inquiry question before school starts, and then generates a second question once she builds a relationship with her students. This opens a second path of inquiry for her, and she still does not feel like she's trying to cover too many things.

Charlotte believes it is difficult to generate an inquiry question before she gets to know her students. She thinks inquiry can shift once a teacher understands priorities based on student need. Charlotte will target her inquiry plan to specific student needs in her classroom if she feels like she doesn't have the tools to "put that puzzle together" yet. Charlotte will change her inquiry question to meet the needs of her students. For Charlotte, "the reflection is kind of interwoven for me throughout all of it," when she prepares to develop an inquiry growth plan. Creating the plan, living the plan, and reflecting on the plan causes Charlotte to question: "What are my prior experiences? What areas am I hoping to grow in?"

During the first years of her career, Charlotte was part of a division-initiated mentorship program. Charlotte admits it was hard to invest in that opportunity without seeing the direct benefit. She understands it was important learning, but she describes a lack of her own investment as she struggled to make connections to the learning. Charlotte tries to make connections to the division mentorship program so that she can invest in it. She finds it "more

difficult to invest in those things just because someone says ‘OK, here you go.’” Reflecting on the division mentorship program, Charlotte describes a lot of learning happening that was “not necessarily aligned with my goals, or even aligned with what’s happening in my classroom.” To Charlotte, when a new professional learning experience is not connected to the focus she sets for inquiry at the beginning of the year, she struggles to find the same passion for it.

Charlotte is grateful for the inquiry process. She feels that in her first few years she had so many different things to focus on—or areas she wanted to grow in—that she didn’t feel she was doing anything well. In the first few years of her career, Charlotte found “that I was doing a lot of breadth and not a lot of depth. And that was frustrating to me. I want to be able to find something, focus on it, and do it well.” Again, at these early stages of her career, Charlotte participated in school-wide professional learning activities with her colleagues. She remarks that it was valuable information, but that it also contributed to her feelings that breadth was emphasized over depth. She felt a sense of “[t]rying to cover so many different things that I really didn’t feel like I was doing anything well.” It is now standard practice for Charlotte to come up with her inquiry questions independently, and then join a division-based collaborative community that closely relates to her area of inquiry. Describing this division-wide collaborative community initiative, Charlotte explains that collaborating with colleagues from across the division with similar interests is beneficial to reaching her own inquiry goals and developing professionally. Charlotte’s priority is to serve the most students possible in her classroom at the same time. Her inquiry questions must be able to accommodate her need to shift priorities when necessary.

Charlotte explains she has worked at three different schools during her first five years of teaching. Each school is very different in its approach to inquiry-based professional learning.

From June of one school year to September of another, Charlotte has not had the opportunity to be in the same teaching assignment. Due to this ongoing change, Charlotte has never “had the opportunity to say hey, this is what I was working on last year, or this was where I was last year.” Charlotte uses the word ‘inconsistency’ to explain her situation. There have been things in her career to-date that she feels good about, and there are things she does not feel good about; still, Charlotte asks herself: “What do I want to get from this?” Reflecting back, Charlotte admits that she cannot recall her inquiry questions from her first couple years of teaching. She explains that her forgetting is likely “because I wasn’t the one who came up with them.” This school year, Charlotte has a new administrative team and feels a lot is still being determined - a schoolwide professional learning plan is not fully developed yet.

During her first teaching experience, Charlotte recalls entering the professional learning environment and planning to go with the flow. Because she did not have full autonomy over her own inquiry planning, she felt less satisfaction from the process. Charlotte found it difficult to integrate within a team of teachers that was already established. She was still discovering who she was as a teacher, and who she wanted to become. At this first school, grade level teams generated their own questions, and then it was encouraged that everyone attend the same division-supported collaborative community. Charlotte explains that “you went...and you did everything kind of the same with your group.” There were a couple of Charlotte’s colleagues who had been working together for fifteen years. As teaching partners, they had been in parallel teaching assignments for that entire time, and she describes they were “a very well-oiled machine” by the time Charlotte joined them. School-wide instruction with inquiry-based professional learning was focused on administrators sharing their guiding inquiry question and leading the school through that learning. Charlotte remembers a number of guest speakers and

activities during staff meetings that were focused on priority areas for the administrators. Charlotte's experience with the professional learning shared by her administration was great; however, she reflects that: "Was I necessarily the most invested in it because I had come up with it? No." She explains: "Did I make a lot of growth those years? Absolutely. Was it related to my inquiry? No."

At Charlotte's second school site, she was part of an inquiry team with teachers from different grade levels; their assignments did not fit the other grade level team configurations, so they were placed together. The group had different goals, different expectations of themselves, and different past experiences. Charlotte describes trying to make it work, but it was difficult and tricky to remain cohesive. At this school, Charlotte explains that people were encouraged to create one inquiry question as a grade level team, and one question that was personal. Charlotte and her colleagues were given one hour per week of collaboration time. Grade level teams met and discussed their inquiry questions. Teachers were encouraged to reflect, grow, and engage in learning within their inquiry areas. Charlotte explains that at this second school site, although it was "kind of doing professional learning together, it wasn't like everyone's doing everything together."

Charlotte's third site-based inquiry experience was during the COVID-19 pandemic when she was reassigned as an online teacher. Charlotte describes not having anyone who really knew what she was going through and experiencing; she had nobody to reflect with. Unlike Charlotte, another colleague who was also teaching online was working from home. Charlotte was experimenting with different aspects of her inquiry and responding to her reflections based on student and family feedback. Charlotte describes doing her own thing and trying different things out. She found this to be a positive experience with her inquiry. Charlotte wonders if "maybe I

am more like a lone wolf and kind of like doing my own thing?” According to Charlotte, this experience of an inquiry process while teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic was the most beneficial yet. Charlotte feels rewarded because she received great feedback from her administrators and from the families of students in her online class. Her experience of inquiry while teaching online gave her the confidence to acknowledge she does not have to do everything with someone else. Charlotte remarks: “I can...follow my own path and do my own thing.”

In her current role, Charlotte is collaborating with her own trio of teachers on an in-person grade level team. When discussing their inquiry questions, Charlotte found her first question was similar to one colleague’s question, and her second question was very similar to that of her other colleague. Charlotte and her colleagues developed their inquiry questions separately, and then came together to share and discuss them. Collaborating with her grade level team, and sharing their inquiry questions, allows Charlotte to get to know her colleagues more, including how their classrooms work and how they tick. Collaboration at a school level was impeded by COVID disruptions, and over the past few years it has made schoolwide collaboration difficult.

This year, Charlotte has two inquiry areas she wants to develop, but as she got to know her students more, she wishes she chose a different inquiry route. Charlotte believes strongly in meeting the needs of her students through her inquiry plans. Although she starts planning her inquiry before school starts, she believes her students will show her “different areas that would better serve them” once she gets to know them. Charlotte describes the need for balance in her classroom between using inquiry to meet the needs of individual students versus the group. She hopes to find an inquiry approach that will engage students who need consistent support, but still

supports the whole class. Charlotte is willing to add a third inquiry focus and re-prioritize her efforts as long as student need is driving that inquiry throughout the year.

During her first years of teaching, Charlotte was part of collaborative inquiry questions based on what the expectations were—or what she *felt* the expectations were—for staff working as grade level teams. She was not invested. Charlotte says, “I did not feel like I was able to get out of it what I wanted to get out of it.” She did not see the growth she wanted to make. From Charlotte’s experiences, whether division-based or school-based, when she is able to connect the learning to something she is invested in, she will derive more benefit from it. Charlotte explains that activities that encourage a lot of active thinking, reflection, and relating back to her own teaching experiences allow her to invest deeply. Charlotte explains that once she developed her own inquiry goals, took the lead on her own learning, and forged her own path, she was more invested. She cannot recall the goals from her first years of teaching.

In her life outside of teaching, Charlotte finds inquiry is used during conversations with her administrators or family members who also have careers in education. These conversations are very reflective for Charlotte. To Charlotte, reflection is an important part of professional development, but she admits that an inquiry-based approach is the only one that she knows. The ability to reflect on her learning is important to Charlotte; when she is encouraged to think deeply, her engagement grows. Inquiry and reflection routines fulfill important roles in Charlotte’s life. From “the very seeds of it,” Charlotte describes her career as having a very reflective focus. Charlotte admits that “now I’m learning to kind of do that on my own.”

Charlotte says the learning curve was very steep in her first year of teaching; navigating multiple learning priorities was difficult. Charlotte benefits from having some form of a goal, or focus, at the start of the school year. She returns to those goals while engaging in professional



learning throughout the year. She relates experiences during staff meetings or other professional learning back to her inquiry questions. Despite her first experiences in the school division, Charlotte now completes her own inquiry questions. Anything more than two inquiry questions is challenging for Charlotte - focusing on two is manageable. Charlotte recalls that early on, she tried to follow the lead of her colleagues; however, she then found herself wondering: “What are we interested in? What are we going to...pursue through our...inquiry growth plan?” Presently, Charlotte finds she has the confidence to strike out on her own. She wants to ensure she will derive the learning she needs from the opportunities she has. Charlotte is grateful for the inquiry process because it has taught her that whenever she has a professional growth opportunity throughout the school year, she reflects back to her inquiry questions. If she believes the opportunity will help her with her inquiry, she will pursue it; equally, she will avoid it when it does not connect...because she does not want too many focus areas.

Charlotte believes that learning is life-long. Ongoing learning, reflection, and trying out new things encourages Charlotte “to discover and be better than the person that you were yesterday.” Charlotte describes a very strong connection with her mom. Charlotte’s mom will ask her anything, and Charlotte will begin talking and reflecting. Charlotte’s mom is an educator and helps people reflect upon themselves. Her mom asks her questions in a way that helps Charlotte think, and it was a benefit to her growing up and into adulthood. Because of this relationship, reflection has become a huge part of Charlotte’s life. Several years into her career, Charlotte now finds she has a variety of experiences to draw from. With a larger network, and more experience, Charlotte does a lot more of the personal inquiry herself; although, conversations with her supportive mom still happen frequently. Working with inquiry has helped Charlotte; the direction, purpose, and questioning helps her to fulfill her goals. She always feels

there is more learning to do. Charlotte never feels that she has fulfilled her goals. The more she explores an area, the more she discovers how little she knows, and how much learning and growth there is yet to do. Charlotte jokes that perhaps her inquiry goals are “unattainable” since there is always so much to know, discover, and explore. Charlotte aspires to be the best teacher she can be. She insists that when you know better, you want to do better.

## Appendix H

### Individual Synopsis

**Alexandra Houghton: 0-5 years of teaching.** Alexandra Houghton's mom is a teacher, and Alexandra has positive childhood memories of experiences in her mom's classrooms and stories her mom told her about school. Currently in her fifth year of teaching, Alexandra has held a variety of employment contracts in her school division. Despite weathering many changes (some positive and some negative) in her classroom, school, and division, Alexandra still wants to be exactly where she is right now. Alexandra has experience working in schools with diverse family demographic populations and community socioeconomic considerations. Having taught in both urban and rural environments, and at different grade levels, Alexandra brings a diversity of experiences to her classroom each day.

At Alexandra's current school, teacher collaboration is structured around grade level teams – the multi-age class configurations at her school can complicate this process. Grade level teams gather to develop learning goals and then collectively come back to discuss these goals. Despite colleagues having diverse ideas and interests, the staff engage in conversations to find common ground; this helps uncover areas of mutual inquiry and learning. Through their school-wide collaborations, "everyone kind of has the same set of tools going forward. And so, it really fosters that within the student body." Alexandra describes how the staff work together to narrow their scope to a specific topic or area of improvement - they discuss how to gather information, strategies to try, or programs to bring into their school. Although staff inquire personally, they also meet to collaborate. Additionally, they return as a whole staff to discuss their experiences. Alexandra describes a confluence of a broad range of ideas and experiences from across the school. Alexandra asks herself how she can work with colleagues to use inquiry methods to solve

problems for both her own practice, and within her school. Alexandra seeks experiences in other teachers' classrooms; she observes what those teachers have done, and she considers how she could bring elements of their practice into her own classroom. The collaboration Alexandra describes leads to staff aligning their inquiry questions. At her school, the desired outcome is that students throughout the school have similar experiences in their classrooms, ensuring that "inquiry is at the heart of everything."

Alexandra suspects that some teachers avoid inquiry-based professional growth because it can be scary. She believes there is a misconception for some teachers that 'inquiry-based' means leaving everything up to students to figure out. She wonders if some teachers worry about losing control of the classroom. Alexandra believes there are many reasons why teachers might avoid inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning, but she advises that "you won't open any of those doors, unless you give it a shot or give it a try." Alexandra explains that some colleagues' hesitancy to try new strategies may stem from the time it takes to learn a new approach. She admits there is not much she can do to convince somebody who does not want to try. For Alexandra, risk-taking does not have to include the whole school, every subject area, or every part of your day; however, if a colleague is opposed to taking risks completely, it limits inquiry. Support is important when trying something new. Alexandra describes teachers needing the support of colleagues and people around them who are willing to take risks alongside them. When colleagues are against the process it can create barriers.

For Alexandra, inquiry is not effective and will not work when the barrier of an unwilling colleague is present. In her experience, collaboration is essential for the inquiry process to be successful. According to Alexandra, there is a time investment required for a staff to build inquiry-based professional growth plans. Sharing her understanding that these efforts need to be

in the core beliefs of the school, she goes on to say that “I don’t think you could do this for one year, and then go great, everyone knows the skills now.” Alexandra explains that when challenges arise for teachers, they need the support and collaboration from their colleagues. She continues by saying that when someone is not open to new ideas, it “puts a stopper on the process outside of the classroom.” One struggle Alexandra describes is the lack of practical, clear examples shared regarding the process of undertaking inquiry-based growth planning. Alexandra believes that collaborative time with others—working together, sharing ideas and information—is required for an inquiry-based professional growth plan to be successful.

In Alexandra’s school division, teachers establish collaborative communities each school year. These communities are established to explore topics or themes (specific or broad) that teachers are interested in learning more about. Regarding this collaboration with colleagues, Alexandra describes a process of collaborative community development. A list is then shared with all teachers, and the list contains different explanations of what other colleagues are interested in. Alexandra has experienced groups of teachers, from many different grades, joining a collaborative community to share ideas and experiences from their own contexts. Because Alexandra is the only teacher at her grade level at her school, she finds collaborative communities necessary for her engagement and connection to colleagues in similar roles. These events involve sharing information, working together, and connecting with colleagues. Health and safety measures were enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this restricted some of the experiences that would have taken place in the past. Alexandra describes having two separate days, division wide, for this professional learning. Despite shifting to online meetings, the in-person experiences were “an open discussion and just brainstorming and sharing ideas...with your colleagues, it was great.”

Alexandra explains that a substantial part of professional growth planning at her school relies on strong relationships. Describing a collaborative, engaged process, Alexandra details the gathering, sharing experiences, discussing student reactions, and working with colleagues to experience the growth together. Teachers at Alexandra's school will gather on their own time, even after school, to discuss how they are going about their inquiry planning. Allotted collaborative time during school hours do not include her due to her solitary position at her grade level. Alexandra recalls, during a pre-service practicum experience, she encountered a teacher mentor who discouraged collaborative interactions with teachers in departments outside of her own. Once this collaboration was discouraged, Alexandra began observing how staff at the school interacted with each other. She noticed "it was really kind of like you're on your own type thing...there was really small cliques but there was not a sense of open collaboration or positive collaboration amongst the staff." During another early practicum experience, Alexandra taught in a small, rural community. In this school she found that inquiry and collaboration was highly emphasized; collaboration was essential due to the small number of teachers in the community.

During her final pre-service teaching internship, Alexandra was able to observe a grade level team of five teachers working together, sharing experiences, discussing classes, and connecting their five groups of students. She explains that "[i]t was really great to see how everybody worked together and learned from one another." Currently, Alexandra has found another staff member who is a very close collaborator. Alexandra reflects on the differences between school cultures she experienced during teaching practicums. One school she describes as collaborative, willing to share, happy, and open; another she explains was isolated, closed off, and an environment where you are "holding your tongue and not saying anything." Witnessing

strong collaboration among colleagues, while still a student teacher, was a positive experience for Alexandra, especially being new to the profession.

The first teacher professional growth plan Alexandra wrote was a checklist she was hoping to accomplish. Later, she met with her administrative team to show them her checklist and to share what she did, and did not, complete. For Alexandra, traditional professional growth plans limit the conversations available between teaching colleagues within a school. Her preference is a plan that supports a group conversation, brainstorming, hearing other people's perspectives about the process, and discussing what happens during a school year. Alexandra describes her current inquiry-based professional growth plan as "more open and fluid," compared to the first one she wrote which was "rigid and checklist-based." According to Alexandra, inquiry-based growth plans allow teachers to reconsider how they deliver their learning, challenge how they interpret the programs of study, and question how students interpret information. She believes it changes teacher perspectives on methods used, ways of teaching, and what impact this all has on student learning. "It just shifts your perspective," she explains. Checklist plans can be isolating, Alexandra explains, and instead of collaborating with one another, teaching teams can find themselves separately focusing on wildly different priorities that do not align. A key difference between traditional growth plans and inquiry-based growth plans are the conversations about what is happening for teachers. Alexandra describes the juxtaposition between having an inquiry question that generates collaborative dialogue, and a checklist of tasks next to a list of completion dates.

Personal engagement is central to Alexandra's development of her professional growth plan. She appreciates discussion with her administrators and other school staff; however, she considers her own role in the classroom, her experiences, and student perspective when actively

trying to answer her growth question. Alexandra seeks feedback from the classroom environment to inform her development of an inquiry question. As she explores how to approach her inquiry for the year, she considers areas of struggle or concern for the class, while also thinking about the classroom in different contexts. Student perspective informs Alexandra's exploration of inquiry within her teaching. She will elaborate on ideas that students generate within the classroom, and she values the mutual exploration of a topic through inquiring as a class. Alexandra explains that "my role is to connect all of the outcomes of the program of studies to that inquiry." In Alexandra's experience, only personally relevant topics motivate her inquiry. She admits that "everything that I'm interested in personally, that's what gives me the drive to learn more about it." When an external focus of learning is prioritized for her, or imposed on her, Alexandra shares that "I'm not going to take those extra steps or go further with learning more about it."

Alexandra explains that "my approach to teaching in general is really all about inquiry. The way that I find its most successful in the classroom is when you have students who are interested in what they're doing to begin with." Before planning, Alexandra reflects on past school years or her year to-date. She considers areas that she wants to improve herself; even at this stage, she describes engaging in the process of inquiry. Personal reflection, skill development, and shared learning are all considerations Alexandra makes as she begins developing her inquiry-based growth plan. This process is a personal one for Alexandra. Student need is a highly considered factor as she plans her inquiry. Alexandra considers steps to make life easier for students, what she can teach them about tools and strategies, and how "to help them get to the place that we all want to be: which is learning in a happy, content safe space." Throughout this process, Alexandra describes being more engaged, asking questions, talking to



colleagues, and thinking about what change might look like in her classroom. She finds that people share more information. Enthusiastic teachers will overcommit by trying to improve multiple growth areas. Alexandra believes shared inquiry with other people allows the group to positively focus its energy on fewer tasks. Alexandra will take cues from her students and the class as a whole to shift an inquiry focus from her idea to something that the students are interested in, too.

Being able to see inquiry-in-action allows Alexandra a deeper understanding of the process, especially when it comes to using inquiry methods in the classroom. She notes that using inquiry with students makes a difference to their learning. Alexandra explains the importance of “seeing that curiosity, and that excitement, and those wonderful, surprised faces when light bulbs go off, and connections are being made,” when students see their environment in a new way. Student-directed learning is important, and Alexandra believes that an inquiry focus “creates a really positive environment in a place that you want to be, and the kids want to be there, too.” She prioritizes student inquiry over projects and assignments created solely by the teacher. Valuing exploration through inquiry is important. Alexandra explains that teaching can become prescriptive, but that “trying to find a way to bring in the interest” is important, too. Alexandra observes her students and considers how she can support them in being successful as they move on to subsequent grade levels.

Alexandra describes collaborative, inquiry-based approaches to student learning, and she believes there is an important distinction within these student experiences. She describes “much more learning going on, and everyone is so much more engaged, and therefore more regulated and happier and they want to keep going further.” Classrooms with a collaborative, inquiry-based approach also have students who work together, where everybody has a role to play, and

students are thinking about their learning and generating their own ideas. Alexandra describes witnessing students with a heightened level of accomplishment, pride, and excitement to share their work within a collaborative, inquiry-focused learning environment. The process of inquiry-based learning with students is one that—regardless of the topic—can lead to collectively working together and student ownership within the process. Alexandra sees her role as determining common interests held by her students for the purpose of planning activities that allow working together as a whole. Reflecting on her diverse teaching practicum experiences, Alexandra describes how the learning environment generated by staff can impact the students as well. Alexandra experienced one teaching space where it was okay to share ideas and collaborate; another was closed off and collaboration was discouraged. Describing a student-focused inquiry project in her classroom, Alexandra hopes the process will sustain itself all school year. She believes the process creates important conversations and leads to further engaging questioning for the students.

Within her inquiry-focus in the classroom, Alexandra explains how she comes back to her inquiry question so that she is living it and continuously trying to do it. She thinks about how the students react to the inquiry, and what the outcome of that learning will be. An inquiry-based approach to professional growth planning is more creative and open to interpretation for Alexandra. She believes there are many different directions it can go, and that it provides for reflection, adjustment, or continuation at the end of the school year. Alexandra drives her work through personal initiative. She will record information, her thoughts and feelings, and progress on the outcomes of different activities in her classroom. Alexandra reflects through keeping notes, considering how the day went, retaining artifacts, and monitoring progress. Alexandra emphasizes the importance of collecting evidence, observing her classroom, and actively

reflecting through dialogue with her colleagues. Time set aside for collaboration with other teachers is important to Alexandra; she notes that many priorities arise in the school, and this is not always possible. To Alexandra, “it’s really wonderful to be able to work with other people when you’re talking about improving something in this profession.” She sees any inquiry as positive, even if the desired outcome is not achieved – you can always start again, and you will have learned something.

Alexandra explains this is the second year where inquiry-based professional growth planning has been the major focus for her school. Reflecting on the collaborative, inquiry-focused growth plans at her school this year, Alexandra believes it allows staff an opportunity to discuss the atmosphere of the school and the people who work there. They discuss their learning and ways to collectively improve. It allows them to find common ground. Alexandra recommends that teachers who are nervous about creating collaborative, inquiry-focused learning environments should spend time in other classrooms where it is already taking place. She explains that “[w]atching those kids in that environment, and the feelings that you get as an educator, are enough for you to try this.” After observing a colleague’s classroom, Alexandra recalls thinking “this is what I came to be teacher for...that moment where things are clicking and you’re learning more things and things you never even thought to question.” She saw students taking independence in their learning and she believes “they want to do more because it feels good.” The classroom context is everchanging. Alexandra suggests that inquiry has “helped with...knowing that everything is a work in progress, everything is not necessarily set in stone.” Alexandra sees an inquiry process as one that assists in solving problems and facing challenges. From Alexandra’s point of view, “inquiry is at the soul of the heart of all learning. You have to be interested and you have to know how to go about – what tools you need or what things that

you can use to learn more about whatever it is that you're interested in." According to Alexandra, inquiry "feels really good as a teacher and there's so many things right now that are so hard. But this is something that can really become part of the room and it is really exciting for both you and the students. I think it's great."

## Appendix I

### Individual Synopsis

**George Gardner: 6-14 years of teaching.** George Gardner has taught multiple grade levels in several different school divisions and in more than one Canadian province. George has held a variety of types of teaching contracts, and his assignments have included classroom teaching and several other specialized teaching positions throughout his fourteen-year career in education. Exploring other career paths before becoming a teacher, George always knew he wanted to support young people at high risk, which is a conviction that led to his understanding of working with complex students with multiple learning needs and exceptional circumstances. George's own experiences as a student in school were not overwhelming positive, but despite this George continues to pursue his post-secondary ambitions which include completing a master's degree.

In his first year of teaching, George collaborated with a teaching partner. They planned together, came up with new ideas, and prepared new ways to meet student learning objectives. According to George, "it's great to collaborate...you get to witness other people's process." George has experiences working with colleagues to plan and collaborate - always taking student needs into account. A guiding premise is always: "How can we better meet the needs of all our students and collaborate in that way?" In a previous school division, George had the opportunity to invest a lot of time team teaching with colleagues. George says this was an important inquiry-based collaboration opportunity focused on meeting student needs. George is optimistic when he thinks about the sharing of growth plans to drive collaboration with more colleagues. At the start of inquiry-based professional learning in his current division, George recalls that "we kind of started this inquiry, we all got together, we all brainstormed whatever we needed. And then we

kind of put ourselves into different groups.” Presently, George feels fairly isolated from collaboration opportunities. Because the focus of his classroom is highly specialized, he acknowledges “it’s difficult for me to be involved in those collaborative efforts and really find meaning in them.” George wonders if seeking professional learning, through time spent with like-minded colleagues from other communities, would allow him to observe how they approach similar challenges in education. All challenges aside, George does see a lot of value in collaborative professional learning, especially when it is inquiry-based in nature.

George wonders if there is a way to foster stronger collaboration between the local university and his school division. He envisions connecting the circle of theory, practice, revision, and reflection, through more collaboration and partnership. Theory is important to George’s professional practice, but he admits theory is not the “be-all and end-all, because theory on its own...becomes irrelevant.” George explains that some university professors live in a land of theory; to him, when he’s learning about the theory he is asking “how can I apply this in my classroom, and I don’t know if it’s going to work.” George appreciates one university professor he knows who takes theory and puts it into practice, revises the theory, and then shares it back. To George, this professor knows what teachers are going through, and he learns through practical experience, how the new theory plays out in action. George explains that “my job has always been to solve puzzles...identifying what is a barrier to success, and then, how am I going to remediate that barrier?” George’s motivation toward inquiry is internal, and he knows that regardless of what school he teaches at inquiry will continue to drive his practice. In George’s role, support looks like helping him access high quality professional resources and scholarly journal articles, allowing him the opportunity to go in-depth into his research questions. In the past, access to knowledgeable experts would have assisted George in developing his professional

practice through inquiry. George finds it difficult to find high quality resources and believes that when a teacher is not an expert in a particular area, experts can help. George also says that sometimes experts can directly tell you what you're doing right, and where you're going wrong.

For George, a Teacher Professional Growth Plan (TPGP) is a formality; it can be beneficial at times, and a hindrance at other times. George explains the difficulty of developing a professional growth plan at the beginning of the school year when "...at the beginning of the year they're asking you to make a plan for the entire year... Well, I don't know yet... I don't know what I need at this moment". It is important that George knows who will be in his class, what the student needs are, and what the class composition will be like, before he commits to his inquiry growth plan. You always get new students who are bit different. With experience and education, George has come to appreciate the need to build a toolbox, reflect on past students, and consider past strategies that were successful. George guides his practice based "on my own reflections on my classroom, my classroom needs, where I need to improve professionally." Class composition is also a priority consideration. George refers to an inquiry-based professional growth planning template developed at the local university. He believes this planning tool does a good job of helping create accountability for teachers. Constant improvement within his educational program is a priority for George. George is questioning and inquiring right from the beginning of the school year.

George describes himself as a very reflective person, and he explains that inquiry is always part of his job. At the end of the day, he asks himself what his role was in that experience, and how can he do better. Regardless of where he is working, George will use inquiry because that is how he approaches his job. Inquiry-based professional learning can be overwhelming for teachers, and in the past George has been overwhelmed by the process,

especially when undertaking large projects with limited resources. Researching on a deeper level is important to George. He recalls that while he was doing his master's degree, researching was an embedded process – especially during the summertime. George explains that for in-service teachers “to try and do that on your own while you're teaching is difficult and overwhelming.” Without sufficient access to information, the inquiry process can be overwhelming. George explains that sometimes you get overwhelmed and are unsure where to start; sometimes you start in the wrong spot. According to George, inquiry is necessary during those moments or school years when a teacher undertakes a big issue, because “it's good to put a plan to it.” George describes inquiry processes as cyclical. He explains that “it's theory and then practice, right, you put it into practice, and you reflect on it and then you revise based on your experience.” George admits he has a constant desire to improve as a person and a professional – this desire to improve motivates him to seek answers. George asks himself: “What do I need in this moment to be the best professional I can be”? Inquiry drives his career.

Throughout his career, positive relationships have also been important to George; understanding this carries him through different challenges. George explains that “when you're working with people, you're working with people”. During his time with a school division in another province, George would work alongside his colleagues as a team teacher. They were each responsible for different things, but ultimately focused on student needs. George describes his current position as a “niche position” in his school division. For him, there are few people who can relate to what he goes through, and that makes collaboration challenging. George, who works in a fairly solitary environment, finds it difficult to find opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Due to a structure of professional learning days being clustered together early in his school year, George remarks that “again, I'm stuck doing it on my own, which I would have



done otherwise.” George understands collaboration can be difficult. Describing the first year of a multi-year collaboration, he felt things were going well. In the second year, the group composition changed, and priorities shifted; in the end it became frustrating. George acknowledges that even within specialized teaching roles like his, each situation is very different, and all student dynamics are different. When George thinks about his collaboration opportunities, he wonders if they are limited for other teachers who also work in specialized classrooms and teaching environments.

In a previous school division, and a different province, George had far fewer opportunities for professional learning. The learning was far more prescribed, too. In that school division, there was far less emphasis on an inquiry model, so George noticed a contrast when he joined his current division. At this point in his career – with the experiences and education he now has – George finds that most general workshops are too surface level to meet his learning needs. George believes it is difficult to use an inquiry model with traditional professional development activities. To George, professional development is when “they give you the information they think you need”. George wonders if a school-wide collaboration could involve a jigsaw learning style where colleagues explore their inquiry questions more individually, but through their learning also returned to the school team to share back. Another way George sees school-wide collaboration would be when the entire school is implementing a new process or system designed to meet student needs. George explains that “even in situations where I’ve been in groups in inquiry-based learning, where perhaps I haven’t found the meaning that I once did, I think it still goes beyond what you can do in that kind of prescribed model.”

Despite having different paths throughout his education and professional life, George finds found connection, meaning, and purpose within his diverse experiences. George uses

inquiry both professionally and personally. He reflects often and uses inquiry methods to improve himself as a teacher, in his relationship, as a father, as a husband, as a son, and as a friend. George takes responsibility to support his students. When he needs to do something to help them, and he struggles to find the guidance he needs, he will seek it himself. George explains that “I’ve always used inquiry-based to fill my gaps, because at the end of the day, I need to look in the mirror and say, ‘Am I doing everything I can to meet my student’s needs?’” George would like to foster relationships with people in other school divisions who do similar work as him. He also believes that teachers in roles like his will benefit from support through self-care.

George believes that stronger connections with outside professionals would assist teachers with their inquiry. He sees teachers as the experts on the lesson planning and classroom aspects, whereas outside experts can bring the specific information necessary. During a past experience with inquiry, George’s project became too much to manage. It was a large undertaking and on top of managing the classroom and developing his own strategies, so he eventually ended that work. George insists that time (as in, not enough time) will always be a barrier to collaboration. The expectation to work on his inquiry-based growth plan during the first week teachers return after summer is hard for George. He is not sure what the year ahead will look like at that point. George explains that in his division there are several professional learning days amassed into one week in October. He finds this is still early in the school year to have identified all the needs in his classroom, and he believes it limits his time to inquire later in the year. George believes that spreading out professional development days would assist teachers in using this time more efficiently and effectively for inquiry growth planning. George believes discussing inquiry-based professional growth plans, through dialogue with administrators, brings

a lot of value to the process; unfortunately, the interviews get minimized, not emphasized, or not prioritized in his experience. First-year teachers, as opposed to those veteran teachers with more experience, are more likely to be overwhelmed by approaching new inquiry tasks. George remarks that first-year teachers have a lot on the go. He explains that “when you talk to them, and they’re overwhelmed and they’re working so hard, and they’re stressed...and they’re so worried they’re not meeting their students’ needs.”

To George, prescriptive professional development activities “assume that every teacher in that school that is attending this has the same needs, they have the same questions, they have the same gaps in their learning, or the same areas that they want to improve.” In the past, George has developed a collaborative community to focus efforts and seek collaborators for his inquiry-based professional learning plans. At that time, George formed a group and they received additional time from the division to collaborate. George wonders how to improve collaboration through inquiry-based professional learning. To make it valuable, he believes teachers require “that autonomy to do something that’s meaningful to them, and then to report back”. He sees the value in all teachers getting something out of everybody’s inquiry as well. Professionally questioning, through the inquiry process, is meaningful to George. He explains that “once you stop asking those questions, I think you become stagnant as a professional, as a person.” George believes that “as professionals...we deserve that autonomy to find out...search out on our own.” George believes in the importance of reflection for the purpose of growth and to become better at his job and as a person. As an inquiry-focused person, George believes that “sometimes it takes going and talking to people...doing some research.” George insists, “[i]t’s just how I live my life, I guess, really”.

## Appendix J

### Individual Synopsis

**Anthony Hall: 6-14 years of teaching.** Over the course of fourteen years of teaching, Anthony Hall has taught students at multiple grade levels, and he has held various different contract types in two school divisions. Anthony pursued a master's degree through a distance learning program while in his first five years of teaching. One thing Anthony appreciates about his career to-date is the breadth he experiences within his teaching assignment. Anthony finds a great deal of fulfillment in working with young people who are just figuring out life. He also pursues opportunities to give back to the profession through volunteerism, advocacy, and reflecting on the future of education in his province.

Anthony thinks about the relationship between professional learning and traditional professional development. Presently, Anthony is looking forward to traveling to attend an education conference in his subject specialization area. Before he attends a professional development conference, Anthony will prepare by considering the takeaways he hopes to gain from the experience. Anthony considers important areas of inquiry related to the COVID-19 pandemic experience and education. He wonders what a post-COVID-19 classroom will look like, and he is curious about the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed work/life balance for him. The classroom environment, and personal consequences of work/life balance, are important inquiries for Anthony. Anthony inquires about what he will take away from an experience before it takes place. In the past, Anthony has used his professional learning to explore how to strengthen relationships. One of the questions he took to a conference was "How can I better utilise parents to help augment and amplify" in his area of teaching expertise. At the time, Anthony worked with a lead parent volunteer. He wondered what he could bring back from

the conference that would benefit this volunteer; the parent volunteer was eager but needed guidance and direction. Although Anthony had a good relationship with this parent, he wondered how he could strengthen it by supporting them.

Four years ago, Anthony moved from another school division to his present assignment. Within his new division, inquiry-based methods and growth plans were coming to the forefront of professional learning. Last school year, the staff at Anthony's school were asked to create their own professional learning questions. These were submitted to a spreadsheet and then shared. Staff could read through all the inquiry questions from their colleagues, and learning cohorts were created from staff whose questions most closely aligned. Because cohorts were created based on inquiry questions, Anthony's cohort was quite small – it was he and one other teacher. Some inquiry cohorts at his school were really large. In those groups there were many colleagues with similar questions. Anthony enjoyed this process. He and his cohort partner observed one another teach and they “talked shop”. Anthony feels the setting was right to provide teachers with a colleague who has similar interests, and he believes this experience propelled his professional learning forward.

In Anthony's previous school division, inquiry-based professional learning was not so much at the forefront as it is for him now. He believes it was still present, just not emphasized in the same way. In Anthony's current school division, a growth planning template (developed at the local university) is used as a guide or template. Anthony explains there are two learning goals; at his school, one goal belongs solely to the teacher, and the other goal is determined with your learning cohort for that year. This year, Anthony's professional inquiry cohort is comprised of his subject specialization (“department”) colleagues, and they will create one inquiry question together. Meeting as a cohort has been challenging. Their first meetings were during a

professional learning week in October and the plan was for school-based administration to meet with the entire cohort. Scheduling conflicts for the team have been preventing meaningful connection. Anthony suspects it will be much later in the school year before the cohort will meet as a department to discuss their inquiry question.

Anthony had the opportunity to serve for multiple years on a provincially guided panel tasked with developing the framework for redesigned curricula. For Anthony, his introduction to inquiry-based learning as a professional growth planning method coincided with his understanding of how an inquiry focus can also inform curriculum. Both experiences were focused on the use of an inquiry framework for learning. Going through that process—returning year after year to the curriculum group—supported Anthony’s understanding of the importance of creating guiding questions for inquiry. It helped him to see the importance of inquiry, and the use of guiding questions, in his own professional learning. Within Anthony’s curriculum work, he recalls that each area had a vision, required a scope and sequence, essential understanding, and finally guiding questions. Anthony explains that guiding questions emanated from an essential understanding, and these essential understandings were big topic areas within the curriculum. Anthony describes a great deal of information can be used to answer, focus, and help achieve the essential understanding, and answer the guiding question. Each subject area being developed had no more than two guiding questions per grade level. These curriculum discussions helped Anthony understand why you can’t have too many guiding questions; you overload yourself with too much inquiry. Anthony states, “if you have too much inquiry, you don’t really get anywhere.”

During the curriculum framework development process, Anthony learned that limiting the scope of guiding questions, or inquiry questions, helps to focus where the work gets done and

what the work will entail. Anthony says, “I’ve always kept that in the back of my mind when I’ve done my own guiding questions.” To Anthony, goals are very concrete things, whereas an inquiry question is very conceptual. Along that vein, Anthony explains his belief that in the twenty-first century, education is moving from concrete to conceptual understandings. Anthony’s explanation of inquiry questions is that they are more concept-based than concrete. To Anthony, there is a connection between conceptual understandings, critical thinking, and learning how to answer questions that perhaps cannot be answered. Through an understanding of inquiry and guiding questions, Anthony sees the education system moving educators toward the direction of asking those questions “that we will then be spending the rest of our lives trying to answer.”

Anthony is part of a tightknit group of educators in his region. It is a small group, that is in frequent communication. If big questions arise for these teachers, it rarely has to do with professional learning. Online collaboration has been meaningful and inquiry-focused for Anthony. He is a member of multiple groups of educators on Facebook who are dedicated to pursuing areas of mutual importance for professional learning. Each group has a slightly different focus, but one particular group has Anthony “impressed by how much of a positive resource the group is...they all just kind of talk shop together.” For Anthony, this Facebook group “is one of the most effective professional learning groups, just by nature of the person who created it, and his ongoing pursuit of inquiry and learning.” In another group Anthony is active in, the creator frequently – multiple times each week – posts inquiry questions into the feed and it functions like a discussion board.

Anthony believes himself to be quite new to inquiry-based professional learning. This skill developed as he joined his current school division. Anthony is familiar with a guide for teacher professional learning that was developed by researchers at his local university; when he

thinks of inquiry, he is drawn to this guide, and it is a tool that he uses each year. This is what he bases his annual professional learning direction from. Anthony explains that within this guide is a template for crafting inquiry questions. To Anthony, this is “one of the most important parts of the whole entire thing, because then that really directs where my professional development will be heading for that year.” Anthony understands that guiding questions, or inquiry questions, need to be very specific. He further explains that they “have to be relevant, and they have to be very applicable to what I want to do or what I want to accomplish.” Anthony struggles with vague questions; to him, an effective guiding question will be applicable and specific.

When Anthony first started teaching, his teacher professional growth plans were goal-based. Instead of writing two inquiry questions, Anthony created two goals. Anthony describes this process as an evolution; what he creates now is an inquiry allowing him to ask, “Where do you think your focus should be, and why, and what are you going to do to explore this?” Anthony notes that within his career, professional growth plans have evolved from being goal-based to inquiry-based; personally, he is a fairly goal-based person. For Anthony, it is harder to write a question than it is to create a goal. Anthony finds the guiding template he uses each year to be very helpful; it focuses and directs his thinking related to teaching competencies. Additionally, the guide helps him structure his inquiry around guiding questions that are focused on the teaching competencies.

Personal development, growth, and relationships are important to Anthony. He describes a challenging turning point in his career, around his fifth or sixth year of teaching. Anthony was struggling, having a difficult time with his students, and he recalls thinking “it should be easier by now, but it’s not.” As Anthony recalls it, he was working very hard, and he told himself it was “something you just have to get through...and a lot of times that’s hard work.” At the time,



Anthony reached out to a trusted friend and colleague with a similar teaching position at a different school. Anthony inquired about what was successful for his friend: where does his success come from, what is special about him, and how has he been able to do it? Anthony's colleague was succinct in his initial response: "I do it for the kids," he said. This mentoring conversation opened the door for changes to Anthony's approach to teaching, and it led to a paradigm shift making the day-to-day functions of teaching much easier.

Following that conversation with his colleague, Anthony's teaching became easier and markedly different. Anthony describes this struggle, the entire process, as a "years-long inquiry, that I was asking myself, what is going on here and why is this so hard?" Anthony also attributes this to a maturation process. This struggle was in his first five or six years of teaching, and he believes this was part of the stress of being new to the profession. Part of Anthony's personal inquiry includes his own personal goalsetting, reflection, and questioning. Often Anthony will ask himself, "Where do I want to be? What goal do I have in mind at the end?" The inquiry-based questions that Anthony asks himself in his personal planning lead toward his personal growth. He creates and writes these personal goals, and he revisits them; he sets them early on and revisits them throughout the year.

During his work on the curriculum redesign process, Anthony came to understand through that work that applying a guiding question will direct and focus your learning. Anthony explains that "it only makes sense that our professional learning is moving from concrete understandings to more conceptual understandings." Although he has been engaging in inquiry-based professional learning for a few years now, Anthony still believes he has limited experiences, and that he is pretty young at asking inquiry-focused questions. He believes he has limited experiences allowing him to reflect on the process. That being said, Anthony believes

that goalsetting “can be a skill that can be refined, and as time goes, you make better goals that you’re better able to accomplish and achieve.” Anthony wonders if there will ever be an answer to inquiry. As he puts it, “I think a true and effective inquiry question is never really answered, and I think it can be fulfilled in a way.” Anthony explains that “it all just leads back – the inquiry is the very centre of it. And so, when I do my own professional learning, yes, the inquiry question is at the heart of the professional learning for me.”

Anthony wonders if the next level of professional learning will be to revisit past inquiry growth questions to see how your perspective has changed. He suggests that “as you develop as a teacher, you can cycle back to it and still gain more from those, and I think that would probably be useful.” According to Anthony, as time goes on people will make better inquiries. These inquiries will be fuelled by better questions that will help build, focus, and direct the actions propelling toward where meaningful professional learning should be. Anthony thinks “it probably can make us all feel good how much we’ve grown as a professional,” and he recalls how much the inquiry process “all makes sense. It all makes sense in a very organic way to me.” To Anthony, the work required to write inquiry questions is a “higher order of operation in our brain,” and as an educator he admits that “I think it makes sense and I think it’s pleasing; I think it’s right – it feels right.”

## Appendix K

### Individual Synopsis

**Lydia Fox: 6-14 years of teaching.** Lydia Fox has many diverse experiences in education. From international teaching practicum placements, to teaching in adult learning post-secondary programs, Lydia has broad perspectives to draw from. Lydia has taught in private schools, magnet catchment schools, and public schools serving mixed socioeconomic families with diverse backgrounds. Over fourteen years of teaching, Lydia has experienced two maternity leaves, so she considers her actual years of teaching as around eleven or twelve. Lydia has held continuing, full-time contracts during her career and across the diverse schools she has taught at.

In the past, Lydia has taught in both community education programs and post-secondary (college and university) contexts. Lydia's experiences teaching at a post-secondary level were very inquiry-focused due to the very different level of learners she was instructing. When she was teaching adult students, Lydia recalls requiring a different standard of learning to ensure they were acquiring the material; she also had to understand how the adults learned. Lydia can examine her teaching through an adult learner's perspective. She explains that while their learning may come easier, these adult learners also have specific habits formed – or not formed – about how to be a successful student. Lydia sees a great deal of inquiry-based learning on a day-to-day basis that goes unnoticed as inquiry; she suspects it's just thinking. According to Lydia, "bringing your personal and your professional experiences is super important." Lydia currently teaches through a philosophy that is very inquiry- and curiosity-based; it incorporates exploration and a student-centred approach to learning. Lydia explains that "all of these experiences you have professionally are going to shape you as a teacher."

Lydia has found success with her inquiry-based collaboration opportunities. Lydia explains that each classroom is unique, and no two teachers will have the same experience. She says that while working with a collaborative team you have important conversations about what was successful and what did not work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lydia's grade level team has collectively worked on a focus question internally, but they also collaborate with a partner grade level team from another school site. The separate teams are examining the same question, but through their unique contexts of their schools, teachers, students, personal experiences, years of teaching experience, and knowledge and expectations. Lydia believes "every professional needs to have the opportunity to challenge themselves in their own ways too without losing that, but then you know it is nice to have that collaborative approach too, to have that sense of team and someone to talk to or connect with." At Lydia's school, the staff discuss their inquiry-based questions during staff meetings. They are able to reflect, discuss as team and a school, and they are involved in the inquiry-based question their administrative team develops. On Lydia's teaching team, they have the odd moment to discuss inquiry together during a staff meeting, but mostly it's during collaborative time that is set aside on professional development days. At these times they discuss what's been effective, what hasn't been effective, and they talk about new ideas. Lydia believes an initiative in her school division, called collaborative communities, is another way to focus on inquiry-based learning.

A desire for more time to collaborate is important to Lydia. She explains that "we never have enough time to just sit and reflect about our practice or to have a moment to talk to our colleagues." The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the pressure on collaborative time. Lydia remarks that the COVID-19 pandemic has removed opportunities and moments of contact with colleagues. Lydia reflects that frequency of collaboration can be a barrier to success. She says

that “when we do get together if it’s once or twice a year it’s just almost not enough. It’s not enough time to really reflect and think about what we’re doing or what we’re wanting to explore.” The scheduling of professional learning days is a question for Lydia. In her division several days are combined in October and there is time to work on inquiry-based questions with collaborative teams. She worries that her team will not meet again for many months after this. Lydia insists that teachers should be reflecting more often, and personally she says, “I should be reflecting more often if we are asking more personal questions, but I don’t have an opportunity...to reflect as much as I should.” In Lydia’s experience, she has worked with adult learners. She understands the difficulty of using one inquiry method to reach all learners; some have been in post-secondary schools before, and others have never written a multiple-choice test. To Lydia, having a negative approach to teaching, or a sense of self-doubt and negative self-talk, can be barriers to success with inquiry-based professional learning.

Teacher autonomy and diversity are important. Lydia believes that children can develop with that same autonomy over their own learning and inquiry has a large role to play in that process. According to Lydia, curious kids develop from teachers who are allowed to address areas they need to work on and explore. Lydia resists prescriptive teaching and learning environments and she explains “there is some level of autonomy that you want to bring your authentic self to a classroom every day and you want to bring your best version of you.” Lydia challenges herself to grow in her role. She asks herself the question, “how can I be better or what can I do better,” when it comes to creating inquiry-based learning opportunities for students. Through Lydia’s inquiry and reflection, she finds success with experimentation. After trying something new in her classroom, she explains the “level of curiosity for me went from yeah, what should I do here, how should I explore this to now being able to use it as a universal

strategy within my classroom.” Lydia believes that when learning comes through personal experiences or a personal connection, it becomes far more meaningful.

Lydia describes herself as a person who has always been curious and wanting to learn. The inquiry-based approaches she pursues in her own life, especially as a mother, allow Lydia to be a more effective teacher, too. At an international conference for specialists like her, Lydia found benefit from connecting with other teachers and professionals from outside Canada. The experience helped her to shift her perspective alongside opportunities to share and learn. According to Lydia, “every experience is a new experience, and you have to make the best of what you have.” Lydia explains that her approach to teaching may not be the same way a colleague teaches the same concept; she says, “it doesn’t mean it’s wrong, it just can be different and that’s okay.” In terms of making meaning from her inquiry, and the ways she inquires, Lydia believes that she needs “sort of a personal approach to it, but then a professional approach to it as well.” As she considers inquiry and her role as a teacher, Lydia explains that we are always still learning and growing, but that inquiry changes throughout every year.

While teaching in a different school division in another province, Lydia recalls there was nothing much in terms of an inquiry-focus. She explains that “I would say I had a team, but we never really had reflection opportunities. It was very much like every teacher for themselves.” Lydia believes she may have been inquiring throughout her career. She explains that “maybe I was doing it, but it wasn’t called inquiry-based or maybe it was just me being curious or me investigating my own questions or understandings of a certain subject or topic.” In the past, while teaching in the community for example, Lydia recalls that her ability to teach a program was sometimes successful and sometimes not. The concept of formal inquiry-based learning is one that has been new to Lydia in her education career. Lydia describes that for the past two or

three years the focus of her school division has been inquiry-based questions, focused on a topic, within teams of teachers. At Lydia's current school, for the past two- or three-years school-wide inquiry has taken place through school administration and "what they're looking to achieve as a team goal." While serving on a school division committee, Lydia recalls there being the influence from a division level of inquiry to the work they undertook. Lydia seeks ways to understand how students learn best, and she will ask herself how to teach effectively when so much information comes from a textbook. Lydia believes strongly there is a connection between being an inquiry-based learner and an inquiry-based teacher. In Lydia's experience, inquiry-based methods have always been beneficial. She explains that "every experience whether it would be positive, negative, or just neutral, it's still an experience that you can reflect on and either improve or know that it wasn't successful, and you can try something different."

To Lydia, it is important to always keep your own interests going, sustaining your own level of curiosity and learning. Lydia wonders how teachers can effectively teach with the tools they already have. Additionally, she wonders how teachers can continue effectively teaching with their tools of comparing, exploring, and discussing. To Lydia, each new situation deserves an opportunity to reflect on what worked and what did not work. She emphasizes the value of asking the questions: "How do I get better" and "What does that look like for my class? What does that look like for someone else's class?" Lydia believes in her own continuous learning, and she believes in having reflective conversations whenever she can. Lydia was not very reflective at the start of her teaching practice, compared to where she is now. There are times when Lydia reflects back on a specific student and thinks, "I would do so many different things had I had this perspective five years ago. Or ten years ago. Had I been able to go through that, had I had these conversations with this specific person...." Lydia believes that as teachers, we always try to

improve; however, she worries that when teachers spread themselves too thin, it becomes hard to improve in even one area of growth.

Lydia works hard to observe her thinking and teaching through the lens of the student, the teacher, the parent, or the family that's caregiving at home. Her own role as a parent helps her to contextualize these perspectives. Lydia's connection to her students and her understanding of how they learn and behave emotionally, allows her to be a better teacher and to build stronger relationships. She believes this was different for her before she became a parent. Reflecting on her own daughter's development, Lydia considers it an advantage that she is teaching students at a stage her daughter has already moved through. Lydia believes this helps her to connect with the students a little bit more. Lydia has good conversations with her partner at home; he is also a teacher, and they have valuable conversations since he is in a different role at a different school. Lydia finds that her partner, with his experience supporting learners with exceptional needs, can support her with her own questions about her practice. Lydia will seek support from her partner. She will say, "obviously you weren't there, but you know, do you have any suggestions, or do you have any idea of how I could do this better?" For Lydia and her partner, their ability to build strong relationships and connections advantages them both as educators. She explains, "that's one thing that we're very like aware of I think in our personal lives and then in our classrooms." Lydia's ability to discuss life's complexities with her partner at home, helps her to "hear and learn and understand my students and how they are emotionally".

For Lydia, a more traditional professional growth plan and her new inquiry-focused plans have always been somewhat similar. She approaches the process by asking: "What do I want to learn this year? What is my focus?" Lydia divides her growth plan into a personal growth question as well as two areas of academic improvement. The last few years of her career, Lydia



has been more inquiry-focused whereas in the past she describes having less direction: “I just went and whatever I decided to be curious about, I participated in.” Lydia describes attending professional development without an overall idea of what she wanted to learn - she was just seeking interesting opportunities. Each year Lydia’s focus for inquiry is different and she explains this is because it depends on the classroom, the types of learners she has, and the class composition. Reflecting on her time with adult learners, Lydia would ask herself how she could motivate the learners to learn when some of them had no previous experience in post-secondary. After being in the classroom for a while each year, Lydia becomes surer of her focus for inquiry. Lydia explains that much of her thoughts and feelings will revolve around wondering, “How am I going to effectively teach this learner based on their needs?” She asks herself, “What do I need to know about this type of learning that’s going to help me with their learning in whatever subject?” Without a strong background of supporting students with complex needs, Lydia acknowledges that is a growth area for her to focus on in the future. This school year, Lydia is reflecting on the question of community and how she can build connection following a time of feeling so disconnected. Her priorities for inquiry-based growth this year include focussing on understanding every student in her classroom while simultaneously building a sense of community and connection.

## Appendix L

### Individual Synopsis

**Nathan Hudson: 15+ years of teaching.** With over 17 years of teaching experience, Nathan Hudson came to his career with a diverse academic experience in post-secondary. Nathan also holds a professional designation outside of his education career and left the profession for several years to work in the private sector. As a teacher, Nathan's experiences in schools include working at multiple different grade levels, and in diverse configurations of schools within broadly different communities and socioeconomic factors influencing children and families. Nathan has held a variety of different positions and contract types within multiple school divisions, but he believes his current assignment, which he has held for eight years, came at the point of bringing all the worlds of Nathan's past experiences together into one position.

Nathan engages in the inquiry process through his school division, and he quite likes it. For Nathan, the process of inquiry brings him back to ask himself: "What is the nature of learning?" He learns more and more about what learning is through his inquiry. Inquiry guides Nathan's philosophy of education, but it steers him toward feeling disillusioned at times. Being at this stage of his career, and in his current role for eight years, Nathan believes his inquiry question to be different than those of his colleagues. He also hopes that everyone has an inquiry question that is unique to them. Nathan finds himself curious about what inquiry is beyond just himself - he is open to expanding his view, and he believes this work can honour the process of inquiry. Nathan shares his understanding of a recent research study that shows "how belief doesn't actually always translate into action and that just changing what somebody believes doesn't change how people act." This is a meaningful reflection related to inquiry for Nathan. In his career, Nathan has encountered effective administrators who are inquiry-based, and effective

administrators who are more management-based. As he reflects, Nathan indicates “the obvious theme here is that my inquiry in my professional life has led me to create community. Or join community.”

Nathan remarks that “just like we have diverse learners as students in our classrooms, we have diverse learners as colleagues.” Although Nathan finds it nice to discuss his inquiry question with other people in the school division, he does not have many deep learning experiences with collaborating across the division. Division-wide collaboration has been hit and miss for Nathan. He finds meaning in having good conversations with colleagues – people who can reflect well what he is saying and vice versa. Nathan explains that “it’s really hard for teachers to listen and to not solve problems for people and fix it and tell people what to do.” As a teacher, Nathan appreciates connecting with colleagues through an inquiry-based approach either formally or informally. He will engage his colleagues whether they are across the hall or down the hall; that is just how he likes to work. When Nathan finds a colleague to listen and discuss with him, the conversation can lead to new directions for him, and sometimes the conversation leads to clarity in his inquiry. Through conversation, Nathan finds he can examine his inquiry question and access a layer of it that he did not previously consider; it helps him uncover what is really important. In the past, Nathan’s inquiry starts with accessing his peers and colleagues, and then expands to selecting conferences and other professional learning to pursue.

In his second year of teaching, Nathan recalls encountering a difficult pedagogical challenge. Through an inquiry-based approach, he started asking questions of himself and others to seek advice and strategies. He also recalls thinking deeply on the day-to-day practical aspects of teaching and inquiring about that process. Inquiry leads Nathan to conferences and finding more people who are deep thinkers on the same subjects and topics that he is. Early on in his

career, experts had more influence on Nathan's inquiry process; he explains "I did get a lot out of sitting and listening to an expert talk. Like I really did because I didn't know a lot of stuff." For Nathan, experts had a role to play in his development – there was important information they had, and he needed, in order to make sense of things. In his first three years or so years of teaching, Nathan believes a goal-based approach to his growth plan was still really effective. According to Nathan, "there were definitely things I just needed to get better at and the only way to do that was to say I'm going to get better at this thing and do it all year." Nathan's experience with inquiry has been since his first year of teaching. He explains that he began asking himself hard questions and as he came to answer those questions, he continued to dig deeper into what learning is.

An inquiry-based professional growth model was introduced to Nathan's school around three or four years ago. At the time, a planning guide or template was shared with the teaching staff, and they began learning an inquiry-based version of their annual professional growth plans. At Nathan's school, time is given to meet with colleagues in groups of two, taking turns listening as they talk about their inquiry question. The cycle of listening and reflection is designed and shared to assist in getting to a deeper level of their inquiry. During an inquiry conversation with an administrator, Nathan describes an experience when they were meant to discuss his professional growth plan, but the administrator did most of the talking. After Nathan gave them feedback, the second time they met the administrator did a much better job of listening. Nathan has had other positive experiences. Once an administrator was supporting him with a challenging situation. She "was not one to answer questions and be an expert," but rather "rephrase and reframe and you know, direct me to resources and direct me to ideas." In terms of his school-based colleagues, Nathan believes some personalities are inquiry driven and some are not

naturally driven by inquiry. He thinks these people struggle with the process. According to Nathan, inquiry can be a mixed bag depending on the personality of his colleague. He also believes that sometimes the subject they teach, or how they perceive their teaching specialization, can influence this.

There are challenges to inquiry at Nathan's school. Nathan finds it can be frustrating working with colleagues who do not engage in the inquiry process. That being said, he believes his excitement for inquiry, and his eagerness to share, "might hold me back from connecting in a really meaningful way with colleagues." Nathan describes experiences where his enthusiasm for new learning through inquiry leads to potentially overwhelming other people through the desire to share. Based on what Nathan observes in his school, he thinks a lot of professional practice is driven by contexts such as personal anxieties, insecurities, worries about "somebody's looking over my shoulder," and the potential for criticism. Nathan explains that because of their own perceptions of fitting in, or being excluded, sometimes teachers create imagined groups based on what pulls them closer, or drives a wedge, between them. Another challenge to inquiry-based learning is giving too much credence to the words of so-called experts. Nathan believes that an overreliance on a nice suit or really funny jokes can interrupt what teachers already know to be best practice, just because an "expert" is selling something. Nathan admits that unfortunately "there's a whole lot of things that we do in schools, but they're not all as effective as other things." Nathan firmly believes he would derive a great benefit from having dedicated time to be heard, reflect, and share with a trusted colleague each week. He believes this would help to be a better, more effective, professional.

Nathan works within a team of people at his school, and they collaborate to develop an inquiry question together. He feels that his team was just starting to implement some new ideas

related to their inquiry when the COVID-19 pandemic struck; this disrupted their plans. Because they work closely, collaboratively, and within the same inquiry question, Nathan explains that “we’re constantly externalizing with one another and.... able to make more sense of our experiences and find meaning in them and then turn that meaning back into either more inquiry or practice.” Nathan finds that when his team can work through their inquiry, it allows them to step aside from the day-to-day stressors of the school environment – because that is not their focus. The focus on inquiry allows them to remain “centered and grounded.” When they do meet, Nathan describes experiences where they move their inquiry from theory into action while learning from it. Other times, they work to revise their question as a group and decide they want to go in a different direction. They possess a shared question and a shared process on his team, and not all of the members of the inquiry are teachers. Nathan believes there are relational pieces to a school that can impact the process of inquiry and whether or not it is carried out well. In his school division, Nathan is part of another group – a collaborative community – comprised of teachers in similar positions. When this group meets to collaborate, they explore an inquiry-based question together that makes sense based on their positions and circumstances. Earlier in his career, Nathan would find ways to create or join learning communities, and through these experiences he describes learning life skills. These early experiences taught Nathan that being part of a learning community can drive his practice. On his current school-based inquiry team, they revisit their question regularly during meetings. Their day-to-day work is evaluated through the context of their shared inquiry question. Nathan explains that “because we’re not trying to answer it, we can go in different directions with the same question that seems to work really well.” During phases of formal reflection – on professional development days, for example – the inquiry team will analyze how they are progressing and discuss the next phases of their inquiry.

When working in other divisions, Nathan found inquiry was never a formal process. His experience is that inquiry is more formal in this current division. As inquiry-based practices grew in his current division, Nathan remembers feeling excited about increasing teacher autonomy over professional learning. He also recalls appreciating the recognition that “learning actually happens more through inquiry than through just very well-organized presentations.” Nathan inquires deeply, and he is presently in the third year of his current inquiry question. Nathan believes the process of inquiry naturally shies away from a reliance on experts, but he also believes there is a role for individuals with expertise to share information with those who need and require that support. Recent experiences with “non-inquiry-based approaches to my professional learning really fell flat” for Nathan. He warns these experiences can even sometimes be dangerous. Nathan explains that so-called experts can interrupt what teachers know to be true—acquired over years of time and experience—simply because they are deemed to be “experts”. Inquiry-based learning experiences draw Nathan to new communities of learners. Becoming part of new learning communities prompts Nathan to feel a responsibility toward those individuals, and that community, and he describes honoring the lens through which they collectively view their learning. Nathans experiences of inquiry build a community around him.

Nathan’s professional growth plan has always been inquiry-based, despite working in other divisions where the expectation was to complete a list of goals. In these cases, he would still ground his plan with inquiry, instead of checking off goals. Although Nathan prefers a growth plan expectation that is overtly inquiry-focused, he will find a way to bring it back to inquiry each time. Inquiry drives Nathan’s professional growth plans. The longer he works in education, the less goal-oriented processes are important to Nathan; he finds they hold him back personally. In his school division, the inquiry growth plan process is systematized through a

template, or guiding document, that teachers use. Nathan believes the folded inquiry template is meant to guide professionals through the process of inquiry and to report on what their inquiry entails. Other than beginning the inquiry process, Nathan finds he does not use the template much. He finds completing the guiding document distracts him from the actual inquiry itself. Nathan recalls that once two of his administrators role-played what an inquiry relationship could look like; to Nathan, he thought this is just what good listening skills should look like. For Nathan, inquiry means developing a question that he would like to explore – he is not actually trying to answer the question but explore it. Nathan explains that for his learning community, inquiry has “really driven process. It’s really driven centering ourselves on a ‘why’.”

From Nathan’s perspective, connections to inquiry are present in his whole life. Although he took music lessons as a child, Nathan’s approach to music today is inquiry-based. He prefers questioning the process of music inquiry, over formalized music training. Nathan thinks perhaps his brain is naturally inquiry-based since he asks questions all the time and is constantly seeking answers. Describing himself as a “kid that wanted to know more stuff and know why,” Nathan wonders if his inquiry focus is both a gift and a curse sometimes. He does not think he did anything special to develop his natural inquiry. In Nathan’s personal life he loves to build and create things, which he believes to be an entirely inquiry-based process. As a parent, Nathan began asking questions before his first child was born. He admits that some of these questions he has answered...but most he has not. Nathan loves inquiry because he gets to learn from a lot of people; to him, the more experience he has, the more inquiry is important in his life. Nathan explains his experience that inquiry “creates kind of a fluency in life where things actually are connected to one another...It all becomes this one kind of thing even though they all appear different.”



Nathan says that he has a lot of different questions than a newer teacher might have. The longer he goes through his career, Nathan believes his reliance on experts reduces more and more. It is a rare occasion for Nathan to “hear something that hasn’t been said before by somebody else. Or that I haven’t discovered in the classroom already.” To Nathan, his journey with inquiry has broadened his perspective and simultaneously blurred the lines between what is meant by school and learning. He expresses that inquiry has “grown everything in my mind.” Inquiry helps Nathan consider the nature of learning, and this understanding has grown for Nathan over the course of his career and through his inquiry. What students submit on worksheets or show on a test feels like very, very limited views of learning for Nathan. In Nathan’s experience, learning is precious. He explains that we “have limited time with students, we have limited resources with students. They have limited time; they have limited resources. So how do we learn as much as we can in that limited time we have?”

## Appendix M

### Individual Synopsis

**Amy Willis: 15+ years of teaching.** Amy Willis has held several different contract types during her career, all of them full-time, with more than one school division. Although Amy has been teaching for nearly two decades, she also had a career in another field before pursuing her degree in education and becoming a teacher. Amy's professional experiences both in and outside of teaching have brought her to some very specialized teaching positions that support students with complex needs at various different grade levels. Core to Amy's beliefs about education is that all children can succeed; some just might require a different route toward finding their success.

Amy believes that anytime a teacher can have autonomy, they can make their inquiry suit their passion and what they are striving for. To Amy, inquiry is her life. She describes her life as a process of questioning, and sometimes going down roads that lead to nowhere. Amy pursues paths toward more inquiry because she is interested in it. In her family, Amy's father was a school principal. In their conversations growing up, he always led with questions. She believes this is where her questioning comes into play. Amy believes in inquiry-based learning. Amy insists that inquiry works if "you are an individual that loves to question, if you're an individual that loves inquiry and loves to gain knowledge in different areas and finds that fascinating and exciting."

Amy describes past experiences with division-wide professional development where she was told where to go, what to do, and how to do it. She admits that it is hard to have someone tell you what you need to learn within a traditional professional development sense. When Amy thinks of goals-based planning and professional development she thinks, "one shot deal, do it or

don't. Implement it, don't implement it." Amy appreciates the opportunity, at events like teachers' convention, to pick and choose what sessions to pursue according to her own inquiry. Sometimes Amy sees the need for professional development that is directed, and that everyone is required to participate in. To her, the directedness is necessary when everyone requires a basis in that subject or area, and then their personal inquiry can take it further. Amy explains that when professional development is made mandatory, she knows it will be okay because they are learning together. Because of her experience with inquiry, she can still see professional development as helpful; she explains that "it kind of gives you another opportunity that maybe you wouldn't look at."

In her role as a specializing teacher, Amy has experience collaborating with classroom teachers in different contexts other than her own. She describes checking-in with teacher collaborators, sharing what her students are learning, connecting over sharing of information, and working on information together. To collaborate, Amy will offer information that's available to her, and follow up with conversations or answering questions for her colleagues. She is always careful to allow her collaborating teachers to buy into the collaboration first. In Amy's experience, collaboration centres on working with teachers to support student learning, skill transfer, and transitioning between different learning environments. Sharing of information, encouraging dialogue and discussion, and proposing ways to do the work collaboratively, are all ways that Amy encourages participation with teacher colleagues. Amy spends a lot of time in that mode of collaboration, which she describes as being action oriented.

In Amy's experiences, her own student support team always feels like part of the broader school staff. Anything the school learning community is taking on, Amy's team also adopts; they implement the learning within their own area. Amy also has experiences working with

colleagues from other school sites. She explains meeting to share experiences. These meetings also include sharing their path, and sometimes taking ideas from each other. In Amy's role, she has experiences starting student support programs. She finds the need is always to inquire, ask questions, and focus on what is best for students. Collaborating with professionals from other schools leads Amy to seek reciprocal beneficial sharing of knowledge and information, and co-teaching of new content. To broaden collaboration, Amy's team has seeks opportunities to view other school sites and educational settings. They like to see how others do it. Visiting different schools and programs allows Amy to satisfy part of her inquiry that recommends she see what others are doing.

At the start of Amy's career, she explains that "inquiry was all we did." Amy's direction has always been toward working collaboratively, within a team, for the purpose of student success. Amy describes wondering with her collaborators: "[h]ow do we teach them so that they can learn and become contributing citizens of the community?" To meet the needs of her team and their professional inquiry, Amy organizes staff participation in conferences they can attend together. During this professional learning time, the team will decide what learning they should do together, and when it makes sense to split themselves up to learn different things. They will bring their learning back to the group for the purpose of collaboration. Amy acknowledges that all members of the learning team bring their own unique perspectives and perceptions. This is another reason why she appreciates inquiry – each person can bring their unique experiences and contribute to the inquiry process. Amy explains that within an inquiry-focused process, "you can go back and forth, and you can change [your methods], and you can do so much change within it without losing sight of what you're aiming for." Amy works within a tightly knit team and explains that "any of the inquiry that we would do, we would do it together."

In Amy's early experiences with professional growth plans, she explains a straightforward process of writing multiple goals, adding strategies, and listing the people who would help her. There was an evaluation step, a couple of reflection questions, and space to write a few paragraphs, lists, or point-form notes. Amy explains that she would take the professional goals and make them into inquiry - it was always her aim to inquire. Amy admits that inquiry can be fairly broad; however, she explains that teachers can select their avenues and approaches toward their inquiry. In Amy's school division, there is a guide or template that is offered to support inquiry-based professional growth plans. She shares that it is a facilitated practice, with guiding areas. For Amy, the layout of the guiding template is nice because it supports the questioning within inquiry and allows a teacher to consider the strategies they will use in their inquiry. She explains "it's not your typical teacher professional growth plan." Amy explains there are many different ways to go about inquiry, but when you inquire you learn a great deal. Inquiry can also lead to more questions. Inquiry works best for Amy because of the questioning aspect of it. To Amy, goals are more definitive. She explains that inquiry offers a lot more room to grow. Amy's team inquiry question is cross-curricular, and it goes deep. Her team brings in resources that will support one another in teaching and learning together. Amy explains that inquiry allows for consistent evaluation through check-in points. The checking-in is embedded in the process for Amy, and she understands that inquiry takes work through action and continuous effort.

At a different school division earlier in her career, Amy was creating a new program. At the time, her effort was entirely inquiry-based, and her team was given permission to undertake the inquiry necessary. When her team joins school-based staff for their collaborative inquiry time, they seek areas that are of interest to them and participate in the professional learning of the

group. Amy explains that her current team and their inquiry hopes were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She says they would be continuing with their focus had the COVID-19 pandemic not interrupted. In Amy's experience of starting and growing programs, inquiry has always been helpful. Sharing information with others has led to their own programs growing, and Amy shares experiences of the mutual sharing of ideas, resources, and questions. Amy appreciates sharing with others; she is willing to share her expertise so that teachers can take that experience to build upon it to meet their own needs.

Teachers are busy people, and Amy insists that teachers have multiple priorities beyond their own inquiry. Amy explains that these conflicting priorities "can sometimes overshadow their passion for what they want to do, because they're things that they need to do in order for the day to go a certain way." Amy describes that through her own inquiry learning she seeks a base of knowledge, reads books, explores different website, and inquires throughout. Because Amy works in an alternate school learning environment, she sees her own privilege to pursue inquiry to its utmost potential. Amy understands that not all teachers have the opportunity she does – these teachers have things that continuously bombard them in a typical school setting. In Amy's context, the expanse of their inquiry work will stretch from September until about March of each year in laying the foundation. From March until June, the learning team will be putting everything into place. Amy reinforces the understanding "that inquiry can become difficult for those that everyday responsibilities of a school may take over."

Within Amy's professional learning team, their first focus is always considering their students and then inquiring about how they are doing, what they need, and what it will take to move them forward. Amy describes inquiring around how to support individuals away from sitting through cognitive workload and toward moving their learning into action. For Amy's

team, inquiry will centre around learning what “makes this kid tick.” From that point forward, they pursue inquiry for the purpose of learning student strengths and how to develop them. A lot of Amy’s inquiry is not abstract – it is based on student skill development to support their learning and functioning. All the work Amy’s team generates is through an inquiry focus and approach. Amy seeks feedback from the students on their learning; it is common to ask students to practice a skill, then seek feedback on the practice. For Amy’s inquiry, the end result is that a student feels confident and successful. Inquiry guides Amy and her team, “but what the children did, would guide what we learned, and vice versa.”

With inquiry, Amy admits to not being as stuck. She describes it is less rigid, and not as clear-cut. In Amy’s classroom her team is thinking out loud and modelling for the students; “we’re allowing them to be risk-takers, because it shows that we are questioning...daily in the classroom.” To Amy, inquiry is not always about gaining knowledge. Amy wonders how, without inquiry, an individual moves forward with action? She wonders how individuals guide their action without inquiry-based practices. Within traditional professional development, Amy explains that sometimes the learning can be too specific with too much around it. Some colleagues may be at that level, and they can move forward to implement the learning; however, there may be others who “have no idea and they need to take 10 steps to get to that.” Within her current practice, Amy’s inquiry has gone on for three years but with different parts to it. Amy warns that inquiry can be overwhelming. She says that if there is inquiry, and only inquiry, people may end up all over the place. She recommends some form of unifying thread when inquiry is becoming part of creating a school- or division-wide culture. When Amy thinks about inquiry she thinks about growth, about process, the ability to change directions or speed, and a

little bit of a continuum of learning. Amy appreciates inquiry and finds its beauty in the fact that there is not really a right or wrong, which she loves.



## Appendix N

### Individual Synopsis

**Rosalie Baxter: 15+ years of teaching.** Rosalie Baxter has been teaching at her current school for five years. Before that, she taught at one school for just over 11 years, and prior to that she held short-term teaching contracts for several years, too. After she completed her teaching degree, but before she started teaching in a school, Rosalie raised her children and was an educator for a community organization for over nine years. In her career she has held various different contract types and has worked both full- and part-time. The schools in which Rosalie has worked are all quite different; she has experiences working in neighbourhood schools with very high socioeconomic status, and schools where families have statistically lower socioeconomic demographics. Over the years, the students in Rosalie's classes have also come from diverse families with vastly differing levels of parent involvement.

Rosalie has experience with collaboration in her professional life. Her choice of professional learning communities (PLCs) "is always connected to something I'm trying to learn more about and that I hope others are also and finding others that are interested in the same thing." Before starting her career in the school system, Rosalie was an educator for a community organization; she describes collaborating with other partner organizations across the province. Rosalie appreciates the availability of technology for the purpose of remaining connected to other educators throughout the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. She wonders if technology is being used enough for the purposes of connecting and collaborating with educators across divisions and in other locations. In Rosalie's school division she has access to collaborative communities, which she loves, to connect to educators in similar situations. On Rosalie's teaching team they collaborate on their professional growth question. It is the same for all three

educators on the team. These three teachers create a collaborative community based on their question, and they bring together like-minded people interested in the same inquiry topics. Rosalie describes her team as “very compatible, very amicable, we’re all in it together;” and she insists it is a “very strong team so, when I say team, I mean team.”

Rosalie describes a high frequency of learning opportunities available are “sit and get, like you just sit, you listen, they tell you, you take your notes, you go away.” She also has experiences with “cookie-cutter” sessions that feel prescriptive and generic - presenters have a purpose and an agenda to get through. In another light, Rosalie explains that much of what is available or on offer today is what she already experienced 15 or more years ago. One benefit of attending professional development events are the opportunities to connect with teachers from other divisions. Rosalie describes having conversations with colleagues from other places and learning about what they are doing. During Rosalie’s career, she feels like there has been a shift in her experiences from more traditional professional development toward a model of teacher professional learning. She explains the types of learning experiences that actively engage teachers are more common in professional learning now than they were ten years ago.

Rosalie believes a barrier to inquiry is when teachers are put in a situation where they are told what their inquiry question will be; when teachers are told what to investigate, she believes they are “not going to get a whole lot out of it.” Another barrier to meaningful inquiry is when teachers try to make inquiry fit a pre-determined program. Rosalie explains that some teaching teams have a goal or program they want to work on, so “they try to bend and meld things to make it fit into an inquiry question model when it might not actually be an inquiry question.” This leads to struggle for the teacher or the team. Rosalie believes there is not enough to inquire about in these situations, which prevents a successful learning process. For Rosalie, forced

groupings lead to challenges for teacher inquiry. Asking educators to inquire as teams based on their teaching assignment, as opposed to their mutual shared interests, may look good on paper but might be less effective. This is sometimes the same for collaboration between professionals with varying levels of experience. Time for inquiry and collaboration is another obstacle Rosalie describes. Rosalie also mentions access to resources as a challenge when it comes to inquiry-based professional learning. Although Rosalie loves collaborative communities in her school division, she believes that two half-day sessions are “not enough to dig into a subject,” which leads to some teachers thinking “well I don’t want to pick anything that’s too, too deep, because I know I’m not going to have time to get into it.”

In Rosalie’s school, inquiry-based professional learning, including the introduction of new teaching practices, will take place for teachers during staff meetings. When it comes to inquiry questions, teams of teachers choose their questions and work together. Rosalie explains that when a teacher has “a strong desire to do something on their own, that’s welcomed and encouraged...but it would actually be an additional inquiry question,” outside of the mandatory team question. At her school, inquiry teams are built based on grade level taught. While Rosalie understands why school administration makes inquiry teams this way, she explains that “trying to create that homogeneity” is difficult and not always successful. Rosalie believes that if people had the opportunity to group themselves according to inquiry interest – as opposed to grade level – the process might be more effective. Inquiry teams meet each month at Rosalie’s school. They alternate monthly sessions between meeting on their own, and meeting with their administration. At first, Rosalie thought meeting each month would be too much; now she believes if they did not meet regularly, the inquiry would “be easy to shelve.” During their meetings, the inquiry teams at Rosalie’s school discuss their questions, discuss their progress so far, what challenges

the face, what barriers they encounter, what opportunities they have, and how school administration can help.

Rosalie describes herself as naturally curious and inquisitive. She believes collaboration is a character trait she possesses. While in post-secondary school, Rosalie's favourite classes were active, involved, and engaging experiences where people were up and moving. Rosalie feels a far more enjoyable way to learn is when people "were digging and learning and feeding off of each other's ideas...fact checking and making sure that we were true to the content". Before teaching in a school, Rosalie used inquiry to work with stakeholders, ensuring consistent, accurate, engaging messaging for educational programs. She also describes that early in her career, she was a technology adopter on staff – often the first teacher experimenting with new technology and wanting to learn more. Rosalie believes in inquiry; she thinks inquiry is one of the better ways to improve practice and engage in professional learning. She describes not having many opportunities to attend professional learning events during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of her own personal inquiry, Rosalie admits this is usually driven by her feelings of not meeting teaching standards, or areas of her own perceived professional weakness. That being said, she explains her love for working in groups and "feeding off of other people and learning from them." Her natural tendency is toward collaboration, and it is her favourite way to learn.

Rosalie describes a key piece of successful inquiry is that you have to be invested. If someone other than Rosalie gives her an inquiry question and encourages her to study it, she says that "it has to matter to me and it has to be relevant." To Rosalie, autonomy over inquiry questions leads to a sense of commitment and being truly interested in the inquiry. She explains that you cannot just pick at random; the inquiry has to mean something to the inquirer. Rosalie

explains that “if we’re not authentically ourselves, we’re not effective in the classroom either.” Despite an expert telling her that some way is supposed to be the best way to do something, Rosalie insists that sometimes it just will not fit. Inquiry-based opportunities lead to feeling more connected to the subject matter, digging deeper, understanding the concept better, and feeling excited to try new things. An indication of her deeper learning is when Rosalie can explain the new concepts to those around her. When Rosalie goes home to her family, she shares what she learns and what she does through her inquiry. When she can better explain something, she knows that she fully understands what she is learning. Engagement comes for Rosalie when she is challenged with a task or problem. Spending time to discuss her learning with colleagues engages her, too. Rosalie describes how finding the meaning in subject matter always makes learning more meaningful to her. She remembers what she learns, and is better able to apply her learning, when she does the “digging deeper” herself. To Rosalie, engagement is the same for her students: when teaching, if something is not meaningful to them, the students are more likely to disengage. Rosalie explains that when her inquiry question “is a matter of my heart,” she is more interested, engaged, able to dig right in, and make meaning of the learning.

Rosalie believes that teachers constantly use reflection and inquiry routines to question how to meet student needs, to discover what learning is missing, and to assist the students in their understanding. Before she inquires formally, Rosalie looks at her own practice and determines where she feels she is lacking or needing to support herself more. Rosalie considers alternatives to current practice, alternatives to teaching a concept, new things to try, and other activities she should introduce. Because of her inquiry process, Rosalie explains that her inquiry question is in her head more often, and she finds herself observing her students to see if she is getting data back on the extent to which her inquiry is improving the classroom environment.

Rosalie describes her inquiry being a lot of trial, error, and reflection; she acknowledges that some days something goes wrong, and other days she might be celebrating “the best lesson ever.” Rosalie believes she will always reflect on situations in her teaching career. She also describes this process as wondering – she wonders all the time. According to Rosalie, the reflection process makes her a better teacher. She describes the internal dialogue she uses when determining which strategies to keep or dismiss, which practices to pursue or abandon, and the new learning she hopes to embed within daily practice.

Rosalie is careful to indicate that her past professional growth plans were still authentic, but she admits they were perhaps less authentic than her current inquiry-based professional growth plans. Currently, Rosalie believes her growth plan is “more impactful in terms of what shows up in the classroom and what I do as a professional. It just grows my practice much, much more than just setting a goal”. Rosalie describes a familiar scenario: writing a growth plan in the fall, visiting with administration, shelving the plan for the year, and finally pulling it off the shelf in June for the final review meeting with an administrator. A typical yearly growth plan would include setting a straightforward goal, attending some related workshops, experimenting with that learning in the classroom, and then considering the goal achieved. When Rosalie considers a question that focuses on improving her practice in her classroom, she can “zone into one particular thing.” She also believes that using an inquiry-based format keeps the learning more current and front-of-mind. Presently, Rosalie considers how to manage her inquiry within the classroom, she considers what data she is receiving from the students, and she wonders about making learning more authentic in order to support student thinking and wondering. To Rosalie, her current inquiry-based practice for professional growth planning keeps inquiry part of her

daily practice – she is constantly working toward her learning as opposed to the way she used to do it in the past.

Rosalie believes teachers naturally inquire. In her past experiences outside of teaching, Rosalie used inquiry methods to research and plan. For Rosalie, inquiry is driven from a place where she is seeking improvement. Looking to improve her practice, wanting to learn more about a topic, or identifying an area of lacking expertise, drive her into inquiry. Rosalie believes that inquiry always has a positive outcome in some way. She also believes that even if she questions the outcome of inquiry for another teacher, she can acknowledge teacher autonomy when “that might work for you, but it’s not, it just doesn’t feel right for me.” Rosalie explains that learning is always a good thing, and that asking questions is always a good thing – she wonders if we should ask more questions. To Rosalie, inquiry is a better way to learn and grow because “we’re never done...we’ll learn for the rest of our lives.” Rosalie is open to making mistakes within her inquiry – she reminds her students that when a mistake is made, that’s where the magic happens. That being said, for her inquiry to be effective, Rosalie needs to be in a safe environment, feel supported, and feel safe to make mistakes. She enjoys inquiry-based learning, but Rosalie must feel safe in order to realize its potential.

Rosalie explains that on some level, teachers do not want to be at the school every weekend planning for the whole next week. Rosalie wonders, though, if one of the things that happens once you have been teaching for a while is that you can become complacent about attending professional learning sessions. Rosalie warns that a danger of getting lazy, and being on the edge of complacency, is the reality that “we’re just not bringing our A-game.” Admitting that learning new technology can be overwhelming sometimes, Rosalie also celebrates that she learned many new things during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rosalie worries that instead of

pursuing inquiry, as teachers “too often, we sit back and go, well we just do it, because that’s what we do, or what we’re told to” as opposed to digging into the learning. Within her teaching team, Rosalie describes a mutually supportive relationship. Her teaching partners share new and fresh ideas with her that help keep their instruction current and engaging to the students. Rosalie shares with her team what is tried, tested, and true about teaching at their grade level. Focusing on their strengths as a team, Rosalie believes that her younger partners are better at many things than she is, but they show her how to do it. In turn, Rosalie explains the teaching methods she knows will work, and she guides them to what is tried and true.



## Appendix O

### General Condensation

**Teachers with 0-5 years of experience.** In the first few years of teaching there are multiple priorities to focus on. Too many areas of growth can lead to a teacher feeling they are inadequate in all areas. Enthusiastic teachers will overcommit by trying to improve multiple growth areas at once. Teachers in their first five years recall experiences observing collaboration among colleagues during their teaching practicums and pre-service teaching placements. Both positive and negative experiences are observed, leading to teachers' understanding that each school is very different in its approach to inquiry-based professional learning. In some cases, staff work together to narrow the scope of their area of improvement. Teachers ask themselves how they can work with colleagues to use inquiry methods to shift their practice, solve challenges, and improve their school. The learning curve is very steep during the first years of teaching; navigating multiple learning priorities is difficult. Beginning teachers struggle without practical, clear examples that explain the process of undertaking inquiry-based growth planning. Providing evidence of inquiry-based profession growth plans in action is challenging; there can be inconsistency for beginning teachers. Teachers wonder if whether, since there is always more learning to do, one ever really achieves an inquiry goal. Since any inquiry is positive, even if the desired outcome is not achieved, teachers can always start again having learned something from the process. Teachers have experiences where they rewrite inquiry questions mid-year because their learning has taken a different direction.

Staff in schools inquire personally, but they also meet as colleagues to collaborate. Teachers are influenced by inquiry-based learning when they join other groups of teachers to share and collaborate. Teachers describe events—collaborative communities—within their

school division. These are opportunities for sharing information, working together, and connecting with colleagues. When teachers do not have a cohesive inquiry team within their school, the collaborative community allows them to engage and connect with colleagues in similar roles at other schools. Additionally, some teachers develop inquiry questions individually at their school, but use division-based collaborative communities to find colleagues whose ideas closely relate to their own area of inquiry. Teachers appreciate and value the opportunity to create communities of inquiry-focused learners in their school division. Collaborating with colleagues from across the division with similar interests supports teachers in achieving their inquiry goals and developing as professionals.

Although all schools are unique, teachers have experiences with school-based learning teams and collaboration. Professional learning opportunities are shared through meaningful experience and collaboration is ongoing. A common theme is that growth plans and inquiry questions are shared on staff. Conversations are used to find common ground and uncover areas of mutual inquiry and learning. Through shared inquiry and collaboration, teachers get to know their colleagues including how their classrooms work and what motivates them to grow. Student perspectives inform teachers and their exploration of inquiry within their teaching. Teachers test out their inquiry learning through practical application in the classroom; teachers observe students and consider how to support them in finding success. Feedback on teacher inquiry and growth comes from many different sources including students, families, and colleagues. Inquiry-based professional learning is collaborative and engaging; teachers gather information, share experiences, discuss student reactions, and work together to experience growth. Teachers seek new ways to collaborate and share the results of their professional inquiry. They are excited to

pursue inquiry because of these experiences, and they plan to advocate for inquiry-based professional learning in the future.

Teachers collaborate within their schools. They do this in structured ways, including developing inquiry questions separately and then coming together to share and discuss. Teacher collaboration is also organized around grade-levels taught or subject-area specializations. Having adequate time and the right conditions for teacher collaboration is important. Teachers experience difficulty with shared collaboration when pairings or groupings are too contrived, and divergent ideas about the purpose of the collective inquiry are present. School-based collaborative time can exclude teachers when they are the only teacher at their grade level or in their specialization. Teachers try to make this work, but it becomes tricky to remain cohesive. Efforts to collaborate are not always successful. Even when teachers seek out learning communities with other educators online, they can encounter limitations. Teachers can find themselves without anyone who knows what they are going through and experiencing; they may have nobody to reflect with. When teachers search for learning communities they lack, it is because they need support and want to keep learning. A key difference between traditional growth plans and inquiry-based growth plans are the conversations about what is happening for teachers. Collaborative inquiry within a school allows teachers to experience collective improvement, seeking common ground, and reflective conversations focused on growth. Sharing inquiry with colleagues allows the group to positively focus its energy on fewer tasks.

Strong relationships support inquiry-based learning and growth. Methods of inquiry are used and discussed in conversations with family members, administrators, and colleagues in education. Nurturing relationships allow teachers the confidence to grow through challenges in their early careers. Over time, teachers find other staff members to become close collaborators.

Sometimes mutual collaboration leads to strong professional relationships and the bonds of friendship form. Over time, larger networks grow, experiences build, and teachers begin experiencing confidence in their personal and professional inquiry. Teachers describe learning as a life-long process, and they compare this to the cyclical, unending inquiry process. Continuous reflection and questioning prompts teachers to consider whether an inquiry cycle is finished or if it should continue into the future. Teachers describe an essential connection between lifelong learning, successful teaching, and the role of inquiry within their schools. Conditions for collaborative professional learning and inquiry vary from school to school. Successful professional growth planning relies heavily on strong relationships, a focus on growth, collaborative experiences, and the support from colleagues who are willing to take risks alongside one another. Some teachers approach inquiry-based learning with the fear of losing control of their classroom, a belief that the process is scary, or the hesitancy to learn new strategies because of the investment of time required. An unwillingness to take risks, a lack of collaborative opportunities, and a consistently shifting teaching assignment, will all limit the success of inquiry-based processes.

Inquiry-based processes for professional learning are helpful to teachers, since it is not always an easy process, there are times when teachers struggle and experience frustration. Some teachers describe a juxtaposition between having an inquiry question that generates collaborative dialogue, and a checklist of tasks next to a list of completion dates. Teachers use the methods of inquiry-based professional learning to understand that classroom context is everchanging. Inquiry helps teachers see that education is a work in progress and nothing is set in stone. Teachers revisit their inquiry questions frequently; they are living out the inquiry and continuously attempting growth through it. Past inquiries influence current practice, and inquiry

questions, explorations, and learning from previous years continue to influence growth in the present. Inquiry-based approaches to professional growth help teachers in forming direction, purpose, and questioning, for the purpose of fulfilling their goals. These efforts come naturally to some teachers who approach their role from an inquiry-stance. These teachers believe inquiry is closely tied to who they are and what they do. Inquiry-based approaches are the only ones some beginning teachers know and their professional reflection becomes key to the process. Through inquiry-based professional growth planning, teachers reflect back on their guiding questions throughout the school year.

Teachers can struggle to create an inquiry-based professional growth question as opposed to writing a goal-based statement. For some teachers, generating the inquiry question is the hardest part of developing an inquiry-based growth plan. Before they start planning for their current-year inquiry questions, teachers reflect on past school years, look to past inquiries for continuing themes, reflect on past experiences, and consider their current teaching assignment for areas of professional growth. Teachers engage with inquiry throughout the school year, and they continuously imagine ways to improve. Essential to success are having a school-based inquiry process in place, and ongoing support for how teachers can answer their inquiry questions. Cycles of continuous opportunity to learn, grow, reflect, and repeat, are valuable processes. Teachers advise that when it comes to inquiry-based learning, “you just have to attempt it;” in some cases inquiry questions are actually unanswerable or unattainable. There is always so much to know, discover, and explore. There is a time investment required for staff to build inquiry-based growth plans. Although teachers value time for collaboration with colleagues, the many shifting priorities in a school can sometimes prevent this meaningful work. Teachers will gather on their own time (even after school), to discuss approaches to their inquiry

planning. Teachers believe that success with an inquiry-based professional growth plan comes from working together, sharing ideas and information, and collaboration, contribute to success with an inquiry-based professional growth plan.

Some teachers have experience with “checklist plans” from their first year of teaching before their division moved to an inquiry-based process. Within the previous system, teachers explain that instead of collaborating with one another, teaching teams might find themselves focused on wildly different priorities that did not align. Traditional professional growth plans can limit conversations between colleagues within a school. The inquiry-focused growth planning template teachers use is a guide and a tool for recording the process and reflecting on growth and improvement. This planning template teachers use helps to start, and sustain, the inquiry process. Some teachers received training in inquiry-based methods and projects while undergraduates and pre-service teachers; these teachers are comfortable with inquiry-based growth plans. Depending on when they were hired, some teachers began their careers just as the school division was implementing an inquiry-based process. These teachers have no experience with more ‘traditional’ professional growth plans – their experiences are primarily framed through an inquiry model.

Teachers describe positive experiences with inquiry-based professional growth planning at the school level. For some teachers this approach is more creative, open to interpretation, and fluid. Professional growth plans that are inquiry-based are more flexible compared to rigid, checklist-based growth plans. Teachers feel guided in the inquiry-based growth plan process, but sometimes it can be confusing when they are unsure if the inquiry questions are achieved, or what role data and evidence collection plays in the process. Inquiry-based processes assist teachers to find a balance between individual and collective needs within the learning

environment. Responding to student need is a priority; teachers must be flexible enough to shift their inquiry as they get to know and understand their students. It is also important to determine common interests held by students for the purpose of learning and working together as a whole.

Since so much of teaching can encompass the roles, tasks, and mandates associated with the profession, the autonomy to choose a direction within inquiry-based professional practices is valued by teachers. Teachers are aware of external factors that attempt to influence their professional learning, and they find it difficult to invest in initiatives that are externally imposed. When teachers do not have full autonomy over their inquiry planning, they feel less satisfaction in the process. Similarly, when an external focus for learning is imposed on teachers, they are less likely to take extra steps or go further in their learning. Deep thinking on a topic fosters growth and engagement, and personally relevant topics drive the motivation for inquiry.

Teachers notice that when their colleagues want to learn – and are excited by their learning – because they are more likely to care about their work and invest in doing the best job they can. Teachers find positive experiences with inquiry when they pursue personally relevant questions, attempt new strategies, gather evidence, observe their own classroom, and actively reflect through dialogue with colleagues. Seeing inquiry-in-action leads to deeper understanding of the process, reflection on using inquiry methods in situ, seeking engagement, asking questions, and imagining change within the classroom environment.

Teachers explain that inquiry assists with solving problems and facing challenges; they explain that inquiry is an experiential process through which teachers find meaning and once they know better, they want to do better. Teachers can struggle to find engagement in a process when new professional learning is introduced but is not connected to their inquiry focus set at the beginning of the year. In some cases, teachers had limited control of their inquiry-based

professional learning in their early years of teaching; they find it difficult to recall this learning because they were not the ones developing the inquiry questions. Teachers who feel less involvement in their own inquiry see less growth in themselves and are not as deeply invested. Learning will occur during those early years of teaching, but it is not necessarily linked to meaningful inquiry-based processes. Teachers connect deeply with their inquiry-based professional growth when the conditions foster personal initiative, engagement, alignment to inquiry questions, and the autonomy to inquire, make choices, and seek opportunities aligned to their own learning. Under these conditions, teachers care more about the outcomes, they find a deeper personal investment, and the process feeds their curiosities.

Inquiring teachers own their learning; what they find personally relevant drives them to learn more, reflect, actively think, invest deeply, and relate their inquiry back to their own teaching experiences. A relationship exists between teachers directing students in how to learn, versus giving them choice in what they study, and levels of engagement and motivation. Teachers are similar to students in this way. Additionally, there is a connection between teacher professional inquiry and the ways teachers approach student learning; teacher learning and growth connects to student learning and growth. Conversations with colleagues, and school administrators, are important. These discussions are appreciated, and they lead to teachers feeling rewarded when they receive feedback about their growth. Teachers emphasize the importance of seeking feedback from the classroom environment to inform the development of inquiry questions. Additionally, inquiry questions must meet the needs of students, carrying forward ideas that students generate through mutual exploration of a topic, allowing for whole class inquiring. There are parallels between teacher learning and student learning. Classrooms with collaborative, inquiry-based approaches also have students who work together, everyone



has a role to play, and students are thinking about their learning and generating their own ideas. For these reasons and more, teachers caution against generating an inquiry question before getting to know their students.

## Appendix P

### General Condensation

**Teachers with 6-14 years of experience.** Over the course of their careers to-date, teachers notice shifts in growth plans and professional learning. Professional growth plans have evolved from being goal-based to inquiry-based. Instead of developing two inquiry questions, teachers were developing two goals at the start of their careers. Goals are described as very concrete things, whereas inquiry questions are more conceptual. Another realization teachers share is that prescriptive professional development activities assume that all teachers in the school have the same needs, the same questions, the same gaps in their learning, and the same areas they want to improve. Teachers note the difficulty in using an inquiry model within traditional professional development activities, and that even in situations where collaborative inquiry has not been entirely meaningful, it still goes beyond the limits of more prescriptive learning models. Teachers' early experiences in their careers (and in different school divisions and provinces), had little or no focus on inquiry-based professional learning. In some cases, inquiry was still present, but not emphasized in the same way it is now in this school division. In other circumstances, professional learning itself was less emphasized; teachers experienced more prescriptive professional development models and noticed a huge contrast when joining this school division with its focus on inquiry. Exposure to inquiry-based methods of professional growth and learning have increased in recent years for teachers. In some cases, their introduction to inquiry-based learning coincides with a deepening understanding of how an inquiry focus can also inform curriculum development.

Within their school division, teachers use a growth planning template (developed at a local university) as a guide and template. Teachers describe this tool as helpful in creating

accountability, guiding inquiry question development, and focusing reflection on the teaching competencies. Teachers associate their inquiry-based professional learning with this guiding document, and it supports the development of their professional learning for the school year ahead. Inquiry questions need to be applicable and specific to the intended outcomes teachers plan to accomplish. Discussion of inquiry-based professional growth plans, through dialogue with administrators, also brings a lot of value to the process; unfortunately, teachers explain that these conversations with school leaders are not emphasized as much as would be helpful.

Teachers have diverse experiences that influence their success with inquiry-based professional learning. Connections to professionals outside of school settings can support teachers in developing professional practice through inquiry. Access to high quality professional resources and research allows teachers to go in-depth into their inquiry questions. All experiences teachers have shape them professionally and influence their future inquiry. Professional volunteer opportunities expose teachers to experiences beyond the walls of their schools, too. Working through inquiry-based processes while engaging in professional volunteerism deepens teacher knowledge.

Teachers see deep value in collaborative professional learning, especially when it is inquiry-based in nature. While working in a collaborative team, teachers have important conversations about what is successful and what does not work. Teachers enjoy the process of “talking shop,” and sometimes observing one another teach. In their school division’s annual calendar, several professional learning days are amassed into one week in October. Scheduling these days together, as opposed to spreading them out further, is questioned by the teachers. Although this time is used to work on inquiry-based questions with collaborative teams, teachers wonder if a more efficient and effective way of inquiry growth planning is to distribute more

days throughout the school year. Clustering these days together leads to teachers inquiring on their own during long stretches of time. While teacher inquiry changes each year, the expectation for consistent growing and learning for teachers remains constant. Professional questioning, through the inquiry process, is important; teachers warn of becoming stagnant as a person and a professional once the questioning stops. Teachers need opportunities to challenge themselves in their own ways while still having access to collaborative approaches, a sense of team, and a trusted colleague to talk to and connect with.

An important element of the inquiry process for teachers is that it can be personal – this includes goalsetting, reflection, and questioning. Sustaining high levels of personal interest, learning, and curiosity, is important. Teachers explain that learning comes through personal experiences and personal connections because this makes learning meaningful. Effective teaching is also attributed to teachers' use of inquiry-based methods in their personal lives. Teachers reflect on using inquiry methods to improve themselves, their professional lives, and their relationships. Teachers believe that as time goes on, and experiences grow, they will make better inquiries. These inquiries will thrive based on better questions that build, focus, and direct teachers' actions toward what meaningful professional learning should be. Reflection on inquiry is a common theme for teachers, and they view inquiry as an important aspect of their professional lives. Teachers find success with inquiry-based collaborative opportunities, and they bring an outlook that every experience is a new experience. Teachers emphasize the need to make the best of what each experience brings. Inquiry is central to the work teachers do in professional growth and learning – the inquiry question is at the heart of their learning, and everything leads back to that.

There are challenges teachers face while approaching inquiry-based professional growth and learning. Teachers can become overwhelmed and unsure about where to start with inquiry, and sometimes they start in the wrong spot. Theory is important in professional practice, and it is a good place to start; however, theory is not everything and without practical application theory can be irrelevant. A challenging situation is when there are few people who can relate to what teachers are experiencing and what they are going through. Some teachers wonder what their post-COVID-19 classroom will look like, and they are curious about how the COVID-19 pandemic will change work/life balance for teachers. Other teachers express how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pressure on collaborative time. Opportunities to connect with and be in contact with colleagues is reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers who work in highly specialized positions find it difficult to find meaning from, and to become deeply involved in, collaborative efforts that do not account for their unique classrooms and teaching environments. Some teachers find success with online collaboration. Connecting with teachers in an online community can be meaningful and inquiry-focused, especially when creators use inquiry-based questioning and prompting to motivate participants in these virtual spaces. On certain occasions, experiences with inquiry can become overwhelming. When a collaborative inquiry project becomes too large to manage on top of classroom responsibilities and personal inquiry, collaborative inquiry becomes unmanageable. Teachers have experiences with an initiative in their school division, called collaborative communities, as another way to focus inquiry-based learning. Within their schools, teachers also experience connections with colleagues who share similar interests, and these collaborations propel professional learning forward.

Teachers explain that inquiry is a tool that is relevant both professionally and personally; they describe having personalities that are curious and focused on continuous learning and growth. Teachers also use inquiry-based questioning to improve personal planning, growth, and development. Bringing together their personal and professional experiences is important for teachers. There is a strong connection between being an inquiry-based learner and being an inquiry-based teacher. Teachers strive for constant improvement within their education programs, and they ask themselves, “How can I be better or what can I do better,” while creating inquiry-based learning opportunities for students. Teachers describe inquiry as a process without an answer. True, effective inquiry questions are never really answered, although they can be fulfilled in many ways. Inquiry is explained as cyclical: incorporating theory, practice, reflection, and revision based on experience. Inquiry-based methods are beneficial whether positive, negative, or neutral; they are experiences for reflection and improvement. When methods are not successful, teachers can try something different.

Teachers explain that for the past two or three years, the focus in their school division has been on developing inquiry-based questions...at least partially with teams of teachers. Despite engaging in this work for multiple years, some teachers still believe they are relatively young in this practice, having limited experiences. That being said, teachers wonder if they have been inquiring throughout their careers so far; teachers speculate that inquiry was actually characterized as curiosity, investigation, and questioning, and not inquiry. Over the past several years, school-wide inquiry has taken place through school administration and the questions that school leaders hope to achieve as a focus for the school learning community. Teachers have experiences working with colleagues to plan and collaborate. A guiding focus is taking student needs into account and reflecting on better meeting the needs of all students through teachers’

collaborative efforts. Teachers share their inquiry-based questions with colleagues; this might be during staff meetings, or by posting their questions to shared spreadsheets for other teachers to read. Learning cohorts are created through this sharing when teachers with similar inquiry questions seek out colleagues for collaboration. Teachers wonder if school-wide collaboration might benefit teachers when a new process or system, designed to meet student needs, is being implemented for all staff.

Professional collaboration takes place within schools. Teachers experience professional inquiry cohorts comprised of subject specialization (“department”) colleagues, or grade level team groups. An inquiry question is developed together. Teachers reflect, discuss as a team and a school, and they are also involved in the inquiry-based question developed by school-based administrator teams. Teachers appreciate collaboration and value witnessing other people’s learning processes. Teachers are optimistic when considering the sharing of professional growth plans for the purpose of collaborating with colleagues. Within the lived reality of day-to-day teaching, teams of teachers have the odd moment to discuss inquiry together during staff meetings, but mostly this work takes place during collaborative time set aside on professional learning days. A lack of time will always be a barrier to teacher collaboration. Teachers explain their desire for more collaboration, and lament not having enough time to reflect on practice and discuss with colleagues. Teachers find that meeting as cohorts is sometimes challenging. Despite the cluster of professional learning days in October, scheduling conflicts at other times of the year prevent meaningful connection from taking place when participants have differing schedules. Teachers acknowledge that trying to engage in deep research and learning while teaching full-time is occasionally difficult and even overwhelming.

Teachers use questioning and inquiry methods right from the beginning of the school year to wonder about what they want to learn and what their focus will be. After being in the classroom for a while at the start of the year, teachers become surer of their inquiry focus. Each new situation deserves an opportunity to reflect on what worked and what did not. Teachers use inquiry-based methods to fill their own gaps and to ask themselves how to improve, how to do everything possible to meet student's needs, and how to consider student experiences in their classrooms. Inquiry drives careers by prompting teachers to consider what they need in the moment to be the best teacher they can be, and to consider what takeaways they hope to gain from professional learning experiences. Reflecting on the class composition, and student needs, guides teachers to where they need to improve professionally. Connecting with students and building an understanding of how they learn and behave emotionally allows teachers to build stronger relationships. Teachers characterize this work as identifying barriers to success, remediating the barriers, and solving puzzles through inquiring about what leads to success for students. Teachers inquire about what they will take away from an experience before it takes place. Annual inquiry goals shift and are influenced by class composition, student needs, and the types of learners present in the classroom. Before committing to an inquiry growth plan, teachers want to get to know their students.

Teachers recall their early years of teaching. They share experiences connected to the stress of being new to the profession, the need for supportive collegial mentorship, and growing pains through the maturation process of the first five years of teaching. Compared to where they are now, teachers recall not having the same skills of reflection at the start of their teaching career. Teachers are always trying to improve; however, when teachers spread themselves too thin, it becomes hard to improve in even one area of growth. First-year teachers, and teachers



early in their careers, have a lot on the go. These teachers who are new to the profession are more likely to be overwhelmed by approaching new inquiry tasks than their veteran teacher colleagues with more experience. Inquiry-based professional learning can be a lot of work for teachers, and in some cases, large inquiry projects with limited access to resources leads to frustration and experiences of being overwhelmed. Some teachers experience struggle in their first years of teaching, describing this process as a “years-long inquiry,” that can lead to asking tough questions such as: What is going on here and why is this so hard? Teachers believe they should be reflecting more often; however, they understand opportunities for meaningful reflection and personal questioning are limited by time. Reflection is emphasized for the purpose of growth and becoming better at the work of teaching and development as a person. Through inquiry and reflection, teachers find success with their experimentation in classroom environments.

Inquiry can take a personal approach – and a professional approach – as teachers consider making meaning of their inquiry processes and examining the ways they inquire. Having a negative outlook on teaching, or a sense of self-doubt and negative self-talk, can hinder this process and create barriers to success with inquiry-based professional learning. Teacher autonomy and diversity are important. In schools, teachers are asked to create at least one professional learning question that is uniquely their own. Teachers emphasize that as professionals, they deserve the autonomy to seek out learning, and to discover the answers to inquiry, on their own terms. Prescriptive teaching and learning environments work against teacher autonomy, and teachers encourage bringing their best version – an authentic self – to the classroom every day. Teachers wonder how to improve collaboration through inquiry-based professional learning. To make it more valuable, one suggestion is that teachers require

autonomy to inquire in ways that are personally meaningful, and then bring that inquiry back to the group. Personal development, growth, and relationships are important to teachers.

Throughout their careers teachers value positive relationships, explaining that these experiences carry them through different challenges. Teachers describe discussing life's complexities with both professional colleagues and partners at home. Valuing these important conversations, teachers come to new understandings about their students, their professional learning, and their role within the complex landscapes of teaching and learning.

## Appendix Q

### General Condensation

**Teachers with 15 or more years of experience.** Inquiry-based professional learning, and the learning experiences that actively engage teachers, are more common in professional learning today than they were ten years ago. Teachers believe the process of inquiry naturally shifts away from a reliance on experts, but there is still a need for individuals with expertise to share information with those who require that support. In terms of support, teachers also have experiences being supported by effective administrators who are inquiry-based, and effective administrators who are more management-based. Ongoing inquiry cycles can lead to more questions, and despite there being many different ways to pursue inquiry-based professional learning, the common thread with inquiry is that you learn a great deal.

Inquiry-based professional learning allows for consistent evaluation through check-in points. These check-ins are embedded within the process, and it takes work through action and continuous effort. The act of reflection makes teachers better at what they do; teachers use a reflective internal dialogue to consider which practices, strategies, and new learning to keep or dismiss. Teachers believe there would be great benefit from having regularly scheduled and dedicated time to be heard, reflect, and share perspectives with a trusted colleague; this would lead to becoming a better, more effective professional.

In some cases, teachers describe experiences early in their career when experts had a strong influence on their inquiry process. They indicate getting a lot out of sitting and listening to an expert. Through inquiry, some teachers still see professional development as helpful – it can offer another opportunity that a teacher might not have otherwise considered. Despite this, teachers explain that much of what is available or on offer today is what they have experienced

15 or more years ago. It is rare for these teachers to hear something that has not already been said by somebody else or that they have not already discovered in the classroom. In some cases, directed professional development can be beneficial when everyone requires a baseline of knowledge in a particular subject or area; from there, teachers believe inquiry can take things further. On the other hand, traditional professional development can sometimes become too specific and inflexible. Teachers describe that a high frequency of learning opportunities are still “sit and get, like you just sit, you listen, they tell you, you take your notes, you go away.” Admittedly, teachers indicate it is hard to have someone tell you what you need to learn within a traditional professional development sense.

A focus on students, and student learning, is important for teachers planning their inquiry-based professional learning. Teachers inquire, ask questions, and focus on what is best for students. Seeking feedback on student learning is a priority. Commonly, teachers ask students to practice a skill, then they seek feedback from the students on that practice. Teachers consider how to manage their inquiry within the classroom: they consider what data they are receiving from the students and wonder how to make learning more authentic to support student thinking and wondering. Inquiry centres around learning what best serves student needs, and then teachers pursue inquiry for the purpose of learning about student strengths and how to further develop them. Teachers also recognize, just as they have diverse learners in their classrooms, so do they have diverse learners as their colleagues.

During phases of formal reflection – on professional learning days, for example – inquiry teams analyze how they are progressing and discuss next phases of their inquiry. Teachers constantly use reflection and inquiry routines to question how to meet student needs, to discover what learning is missing, and to assist student growth. When teachers think about inquiry they

think about growth, process, and the ability to change directions or regulate pacing along a continuum of learning. Teachers believe in the inquiry process, and that inquiry is one of the better ways to improve practice and engage in professional learning. Throughout their careers, teachers indicate there has been a shift in their experiences from more traditional professional development toward a model of teacher professional learning. To broaden collaboration, opportunities are sought to collaborate with other school sites and educational settings. Visiting different schools and programs satisfies teacher curiosities about what others are doing and recommending.

Some personalities are naturally inquiry-driven, and some are not. Those teachers who are not naturally driven by inquiry struggle with the process. In some cases, a barrier to meaningful inquiry is when teachers attempt to make their inquiry fit a pre-determined program they hope to implement. In these cases, teaching teams might have a goal or program they want to explore, so they bend and meld their professional learning process to fit into an inquiry question model when it is not about inquiry at all. Inquiry can be fairly broad; however, teachers can determine their avenues of exploration and approaches toward their own inquiry. Sometimes school-based affiliations like subject area specialization, or personal perception of position within the school, influence the inquiry process. Before inquiring, teachers generally examine their own practice to determine areas needing growth, support, or improvement. Other things that influence the direction of inquiry are alternatives to current practice, alternatives to teaching a new concept, new ideas to try, and other activities to introduce.

There are relational aspects of a school that can influence the process of inquiry and whether or not it is carried out well. In some schools, teachers must collaborate by department or grade level team. Teachers believe forced groupings lead to challenges, and that if people had the

opportunity to group themselves according to inquiry interest the process might be more effective. There is a danger, as teachers gather more years of experience, of reaching the edge of complacency, becoming lazy, developing complacency toward professional learning sessions, or not bringing an “A-game”. Teachers describe experiences working within tightly knit teams that collaborate on creating professional growth questions, bringing the focus of inquiry toward a collective pursuit. Teachers express an appreciation for connecting with colleagues through both formal, and informal, inquiry-based approaches. When professional learning occurs for teachers away from their inquiry group, they bring new ideas back to the group for the purpose of collaboration. Conversations with colleagues allow teachers an opportunity to examine their inquiry questions to uncover what is truly important, accessing layers of learning not previously considered. Teachers are open to making mistakes within their inquiry. This openness parallels the messages they send to students that when a mistake is made, learning is happening. For inquiry to be fully effective, teachers need to be in a safe environment. Feeling supported, and safe to make mistakes, allows teachers to enjoy inquiry-based professional learning. Teachers appreciate inquiry, finding beauty in the realization that there is not really a right or wrong way to approach the process.

It was a common experience that collaborative teaching teams, and their inquiry hopes, were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, inquiry teams were just starting to implement new ideas related to their inquiry when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and this disrupted their plans. Teachers appreciate the availability of technology for the purpose of remaining connected to other educators throughout the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. That being said, teachers wonder if technology is being used enough for the purposes of connecting and collaborating with educators in other divisions. Although learning new technology can be

overwhelming at times, teachers celebrate learning new things during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At first, the thought of meeting monthly to discuss inquiry-based growth plans seemed overwhelming; but now, teachers believe that without meeting regularly the inquiry would be easy to put back on the shelf. The use of an inquiry-based format keeps the learning more current and front-of-mind for teachers, too. Inquiring for teachers can start with accessing peers and colleagues for support, and then expanding to selecting conferences and other professional learning. The inquiry process allows an inquiry question to be front-of-mind regularly, and teachers observe students regularly to gather feedback and data on the extent to which inquiry is improving the classroom environment. For some teachers, the first focus of professional learning is to consider student needs and then to inquire about how they are doing, what they need, and what it will take to move the students forward. School-based collaborative inquiry time is used to participate in group learning, introduce new teaching practices, seek areas of common interest, and to evaluate day-to-day work through the context of a shared inquiry question. In some schools, inquiry teams are built on grade level taught or area of specialization, and collaborative work is generated through an inquiry focus and approach. Cycles of listening and reflection are designed and shared to assist in getting to a deeper level of inquiry – usually in pairs or small groups of colleagues.

Permission to inquire, throughout a career in education, is important. Some teachers have experiences with inquiry from their first days of teaching; they describe the process as less rigid, not as clear-cut, but also generating a sense of freedom in learning. Inquiry helps teachers consider the nature of learning, which is a process that develops over the course of a career. Learning is always good thing, and asking questions is always a good thing – teachers wonder if we should ask more questions. Some teachers explain how their natural tendency is toward

collaboration, and that this is their favourite way to learn. Others describe inquiry as successful for individuals who love to question, gain knowledge in different areas, and they find the process of inquiry-based learning to be fascinating and exciting. Teachers have experiences learning more and more about what learning is through their inquiry. Some teachers believe that inquiry always has a positive outcome in some way, despite other professional learning opportunities also being positive. When the learning team can work through their inquiry it allows them to step aside from the daily stressors of the school environment to focus on something else entirely.

Personal investment is required for inquiry to be successful, and in some cases, teachers experience an ongoing inquiry cycle lasting for three or more years. Teachers explain that in their current contexts, an inquiry-based growth model was introduced around three or four years ago. Working in other school divisions, teachers found that an inquiry process was never as formal as it is within their current school division. Teachers describe how inquiry-based opportunities lead to feeling more connected to subject matter, digging deeper, understanding concepts better, and being excited to try new things. When teachers meet for their inquiry-based professional learning, their experiences move from theory into action.

Teachers explain that some professional practice can be driven by personal anxieties, insecurities, and worries over potential criticism. Other teachers admit their inquiry is at least in part driven by feelings of not meeting teaching standards, or areas of their own perceived professional weakness. Inquiry is driven from a place of seeking improvement. This can be improving practice, learning more about a topic, or identifying an area of lacking expertise. Inquiry without some sort of guidance may lead to teachers without any direction for their growth. A unifying thread, such as a school-wide or division-wide culture, can provide stabilizing structures for inquiry.



Teachers have early career experiences of writing growth plans that list multiple goals with corresponding strategies, alongside a list of people or resources to assist. A familiar scenario was writing a growth plan in the fall, visiting with administration, shelving the plan for the year, and pulling it off the shelf in June for a final review meeting with an administrator. Teachers were still able to make these earlier experiences inquiry-based; grounding plans with inquiry, instead of checking off goals, despite working in other divisions where the expectation was to complete a list of goals. Goal-based professional planning and development can be characterized as prescriptive, infrequent, occasional, and inflexible; either you do it or you don't. Teachers still aim to take professional goals and make them into inquiry-based processes. Some teachers explain the longer they work in education, the less goal-oriented they become – goals become something that holds a teacher back. That being said, in the first years of teaching, a goal-based approach to growth planning can still be really effective.

In their school division, creating an inquiry-based growth plan is supported by a template (or guiding document), which is used by teachers. At the beginning of their learning about inquiry-based planning, the template was introduced to teaching staff in conjunction with conversations about annual professional growth plans. The planning tool facilitates practice, emphasizes guiding areas, and supports inquiry. The tool is especially helpful at the start of the inquiry process. The layout of the guiding template supports questioning within inquiry and allows teachers to consider useful strategies. One teacher notes that past professional growth plans were still authentic, but perhaps they were less authentic than this current inquiry-based professional growth plan model.

As inquiry-based practices grew in the school division, teachers felt excitement about increasing autonomy over professional learning. That being said, teachers have experiences with

division-wide professional development where they are told where to go, what to do, and how to do it. Teachers identify a barrier to inquiry being situations where they are told what their inquiry question will be. When teachers are told what to investigate, they derive less benefit from the process. Anytime a teacher can have autonomy, they can make their inquiry suit their passion and what they are striving for. The inquiry question has to matter to the teacher and be relevant to their pursuits. Teachers hope that everyone has an inquiry question that is unique to them. Autonomy over their inquiry question leads to a sense of commitment and being truly interested in the inquiry. The process cannot occur randomly; the inquiry has to mean something to the inquirer.

Teachers experience community-building through the use of inquiry-based professional learning and growth. Teams of teachers work together to choose inquiry question and to work together. Through this process of inquiry, teachers surround themselves with community. Members of learning teams bring unique perspectives and perceptions which contribute to the inquiry process, and teachers appreciate this. Sharing information, encouraging discussion, and proposing collaborative strategies are all ways that colleagues encourage participation with inquiry. Teachers explain that an obvious theme is that inquiry through professional learning leads to creating community.

In their school division, teachers have access to working with colleagues from other school sites. Through an initiative called collaborative communities, teachers meet to share experiences and ideas, while connecting to educators in similar situations. When groups meet to collaborate, they explore an inquiry-based question together that aligns to their teaching positions and circumstances. In some cases, school-based teaching teams create a collaborative community that is open to other teachers from the division for the purpose of bringing together

like-minded people on the same topic of inquiry. Teachers will also check-in with their collaborators, share what their students are learning, connect over information sharing, and work to gather information together. For some teachers, division-wide collaboration has been hit or miss. In this school division, teachers wonder if two half-day sessions each year represent enough time to truly explore an inquiry topic collaboratively. This limited time can lead to some teachers avoiding the deep investment required to derive benefit from the collaborative community.

Teachers explain that they are naturally inquirers. For some, their parents had a large influence as they were growing up – in some cases it was a parent who led family discussions with questions. Another teacher believes their brain is naturally inquiry-based while reflecting that they ask questions all the time and are constantly seeking answers. For some teachers, their experiences with inquiry began at the start of their careers. Early experiences of feeling part of a learning community taught teachers how to drive and shape their professional practice. Teachers explain that their choice of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have always been connected to something they are trying to learn more about, or the hope to find colleagues who share those similar interests and curiosities. From the start of their career, one teacher explains that inquiry was all they did: a direction focused on working collaboratively, within a team, for the purpose of student success. Inquiry, and being naturally curious and inquisitive, makes up a big part of teachers' identity. To some teachers, their personal lives focus on building and creating things, which they describe as an inquiry-based process. Other teacher might also identify collaboration as a personal character trait they possess, and still others view inquiry as a lens through which their entire life is framed.

The process of professional inquiry can become difficult for teachers whose everyday

responsibilities within a school take up the majority of their time. Teachers who are newer to the professional will also have different questions and pressures on their time than a veteran teacher undertaking inquiry. Conflicting school-based priorities can sometimes overshadow a teacher's passion for what they want to do – they must prioritize the daily tasks that in the moment will assist their teaching. A lack of time for collaboration and inquiry is an obstacle to success with the process. Teachers are busy, and priorities beyond inquiry will put pressure on the experience. Teachers have continuous bombardment within the school setting that can detract from their plans to inquire.

Teachers warn that although inquiry can be an important guiding tool, it may become overwhelming, steer one toward feeling disillusioned, and frustrating when you must work with colleagues who do not engage with the inquiry process. Other challenges to inquiry include a lack of access to resources and barriers to collaboration between professionals with varying levels of experience. Professional learning through inquiry can be challenged when too much credence is placed upon external experts. An overreliance on expert opinion and advice can interrupt what teachers already know to be best practice.

Inquiry-based professional learning experiences draw teachers to new communities of learners, and inquiry leads teachers to finding people who are like-minded, deep thinkers on similar topics and subjects of inquiry. Teachers appreciate opportunities to share with colleagues and they contribute to a mutual expertise that builds upon meeting their own needs. Through inquiry, teachers get to learn from a lot of other people, and the more experiences teachers have the more inquiry can play an important role in their lives. The process of inquiry can mean developing a question that a teacher would like to explore – it is not actually about answering the question so much as exploring it. Similarly, inquiry is not always about gaining knowledge, but it

can offer a lot more room to grow than just acquiring information. Teachers explain that when an inquiry question is a matter of the heart, they are more interested, engaged, willing to dig right in, and excited to make meaning of their learning.