To Nugget, who, like all children, deserves teachers like Cindy, Gail, and Erik
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The decades-long Age of Accountability is defined by top-down reforms targeting the ostensibly poor performance of American public schools. Per neoliberal logic, teachers are both villains and heroes: they are accountable for students’ test scores because fixing teachers is the purported panacea for a nation allegedly at risk. Teacher researchers—who identify, examine, and mitigate their own problems of practice—offer a powerful counter-narrative. Cultivating and maintaining what is known as an inquiry stance, they hold themselves accountable by devoting their constant curiosity to continual improvement.

Joining existing efforts to challenge the marginalization and trivialization of teacher research, this study explored and documented the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability. While scholars have elucidated the onset of the inquiry stance and championed the introduction of teacher research to pre-service and in-service teachers, this oral history intentionally took a long view, guided by the following questions: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance?
Interview data from 3 long-term teacher researchers who have retired from or currently work in American public schools were transformed into narrative portraits and analyzed at the macro, micro, meso, and interactional levels.

The resulting examples of storied stance illustrate the salient characteristics of long-term teacher researchers: 1) playful curiosity, 2) critical awareness, 3) a willingness to be disturbed, 4) humble empathy, and 5) optimistic leadership and advocacy. Moreover, an examination of the deep scholarly preparation and wide ongoing support instrumental to the narrators’ development as teacher researchers ultimately surfaced the people who made that development possible. Therefore, these insightful examples of inquiry as a way of knowing and being can inspire the next generation of teacher researchers and prompt teacher educators to find and foster more of their kind. Additionally, the participants’ accounts have historical value, preserving teachers’ vital memories of the detrimental onset of the Age of Accountability in the hope that it will become a thing of the past.
American public schools have faced decades of sharp criticism for their remarkably static nature and ostensibly poor performance (Futrell, 2008; Gutek, 2000; Huberman, 1993; Sugimoto & Carter, 2016), lately earning a reputation of being “intrinsically beyond redemption” (Kuhn, 2014, p. 101). Even the current Secretary of Education has expressed uncertainty as to how schools “could get a lot worse” (Strauss, 2017, para. 1). Against this bleak backdrop, policymakers have cast teachers as both the problem and solution—the villains and the heroes—for so-called failing schools (Cochran-Smith, 2015; Cuban, 2009; Farber, 1991; Sugimoto & Carter, 2016).

Although teaching may be “the most difficult aspect of schooling to control or change within the normal bureaucratic procedures” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 318), increasingly centralized reforms have made a concerted effort to constrict and prescribe what teachers do, endorsing scripted curricula and short-sighted professional development (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Klehr, 2009; Storm, 2016). These strict accountability regimes and questionably quick fixes perpetuate the teaching profession’s low status while serving a broader neoliberal project to privatize education.

Scholars rightly draw our attention to early signs of neoliberal accountability in the 1960s and ’70s (Marwick, 2005; McGirr, 2001; Ott, 2018; Sugimoto & Carter, 2016; Wong, 2015), yet this trend began in earnest during the 1980s, as President Reagan vowed to “restore excellence” to American education, convincing the public of the need to do so with the infamous 1983 A Nation at Risk report (Gutek, 2000, p. 278). The apocalyptic title indicated the report was “disturbing” by design (Webb & Sherman, 1989, p. 562), sounding a dire alarm couched in “hyperbole and hysteric” (Kuhn, 2014,
The effectiveness of this message—and the widespread media coverage it attracted (Kamenetz, 2018b)—launched a “reform renaissance” in search of “individual culprits” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 7), prompting teachers to brace themselves for a “barrage” of accountability policies (Goodson, 1992, p. 5). Though taxpayer-supported teachers should, on some level, answer to the public, increasing accountability all too often brought a loss of autonomy at the hands of outsiders (Farber, 1991). If teachers were, indeed, the panacea, the prescriptions had to come from above.

In 1986, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy released *A Nation Prepared*, a clear homage to *A Nation at Risk*. The report claimed an interest in “giving teachers a greater voice” (p. 57), but the predominant message that teachers needed to earn this right communicated a dangerous narrative and paved the way for what has become “a contentious professional landscape” (Buchanan, 2015). Since *A Nation at Risk*, teacher bashing has become increasingly more mainstream (Bidwell & Dreeben, 2003; Kuhn, 2014; Strickland, 1998), in concert with the spread of high-stakes testing and privatization (Kumashiro, 2012). A nation at risk needs a dependable scapegoat.

When George H. W. Bush inherited the Oval Office from his former running mate, he reinforced Reagan’s education platform, endorsing national teacher standards to hold schools accountable (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). By the 1990s, “standards, testing, accountability, and school choice took center stage,” as the Clinton administration adopted and expanded Bush-era education policies (Cross, 2004, p. 4). Clinton’s *Goals 2000* initiative, a near-replica of Bush Sr.’s *America 2000*, favored national standards and test-based turn-around policies (Eisner, 2001/2013; Gutek, 2000; Renée & Trujillo, 2014), indicating the extent to which accountability has bipartisan support (Sugimoto &
Carter, 2016). Viewed from left to right as the means to restore and maintain American exceptionalism (Cuban, 2009; Rury, 2016), these top-down mandates have harmed the nation’s public schools by silencing teachers’ accounts of their and their students’ work, stifling teacher agency and creativity, and dissuading educators from taking ownership of their professional growth (Hargreaves, 1994; Urbanski, 2003; Vaught, 2011).

In the current millennium, President George W. Bush’s reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act arguably became synonymous with the Age of Accountability, and the No Child Left Behind era blended seamlessly with President Obama’s Race to the Top initiative, as well as the onset of the Common Core State Standards (Bush, 2001; Cody, 2014; Rury, 2016). Bush’s grand experiment, with support from both sides of the aisle, codified neoliberal ideology by framing “public education as a commodity, students as products, and teachers as workers” expected to compete—through their students—on frequent, high-stakes assessments (Sugimoto & Carter, 2016, p. 28). Race to the Top, as its name indicates, endorsed this competitive spirit, pitting states against one another in desperate grabs for federal dollars while “maintaining reformers’ narrow focus on academic achievement” (Sugimoto & Carter, 2016, p. 30) and continuing to drown out the voices of teachers themselves.

Cumulatively, these policies amount to “exacting accountabilities” (Sinnema, Meyer, & Aitken, 2017, p. 10). Under immense pressure to narrowly and didactically teach to the test (Cross, 2004; Cuban, 2009; Darder, 2015; Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015; Urban & Wagoner, 2009), educators report increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout (Toppo, 2017), a decades-old problem mirroring a decades-old approach to reform (Farber, 1991). Throughout the Age of Accountability, the relentless pursuit of
excellence has stymied teachers’ creativity and contributed to low morale, prompting Buchanan (2015) to wonder how we might stop this vicious cycle when tomorrow’s teachers are graduates of today’s schools.

Modeling how to imagine an alternative, Noddings (2009) distinguishes between accountability, which “points upward in the chain of power” to promote surface-level compliance, and responsibility, or acting on behalf of “the legitimate needs of those placed in our care” (p. 17). In the Age of Accountability, teachers often lack the autonomy they need to respond to students in reflective and innovative ways. Reformers, too, fail to respond to how “teachers and pupils alike go about their business in real-life classrooms” (Bruner, 1996, p. 86). For these and other reasons, scholars have turned a consistently critical eye on metric-driven, high-stakes reform efforts and their deskillings effects (Anyon, 2014; Apple, 1986/2013; Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Hargreaves, 1994; Kuhn, 2014; Meier, 2014). Kohn (1999), for example, cites “a vague desire to hold schools accountable coupled with a total ignorance of other ways of achieving that goal” (p. 74), while Raelin (2007) excoriates “our Western inclination, our near obsession, with measuring items so as to believe we know them” (p. 506). The remedy, according to Kumashiro (2012), might lie in “people who bring scholarly and practical expertise in education and a commitment to addressing inequities and injustices” (p. 77). Enter teacher researchers.

In the Age of Accountability, amidst a “steady infusion of neoliberal imperatives” (Darder, 2015, p. 1), teacher research has emerged as a growing and recognizable movement (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Practitioner inquiry—as it is also known—reclaims accountability by demonstrating the power of teachers to be
knowledgeable, self-directed change agents who challenge institutional constraints in support of equity and social justice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Pine, 2009). Opposed to views of teaching “as a fundamentally technical, instrumental, certain, and decontextualized activity” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 73), teacher research empowers educators to be more than just “cogs […] in an apolitical machine” (Gibbons, 2016, p. 36). When practitioners develop and maintain an inquiry stance, they celebrate local knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), taking “fuller account” of schools (Pine, 2009, p. 25) for the sake of continual improvement.

Burkholder (2011) has expressed a desire that education policy might eventually be “tied to the way educators think and talk” (p. 179). Achieving this aim requires us to truly give voice to veteran educators, as the Carnegie Forum’s (1986) A Nation Prepared claimed to do. Teacher researchers who have long held an inquiry stance deserve to participate in such conversations, for where teachers are researchers, “there is a radical, but quiet, kind of school reform in process” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 318). This study brings much-needed attention to the powerful efforts of long-term teacher researchers to hold accountability accountable.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools. More specifically, this study asks: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance?
Research Design

Primarily framed as an oral history (Yow, 2005), this project also follows narrative models from the qualitative social sciences (Blumenreich, 2004; Carr, 2003). Both disciplines encourage open-endedness, consistent with the purpose of exploration. Further, both narrative and oral history recognize and value the continuity of experience, consistent with the cyclical nature of teacher inquiry (Dewey, 1900/1990). Because the purpose of my study implicitly affirms teacher researchers by seeing value in their stories, my research design respectfully echoes their own inquiries.

Undergirding this methodological approach is my belief that knowledge is socially constructed. Consequently, operating from a constructionist-constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998), I studied the enduring inquiry stance through the people who embody it: long-term teacher researchers. As I explain in Chapter 3, I adapted Seidman’s (2006) model of 3 open-ended interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. After enlisting 3 participants via purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), I engaged in 3 extended conversations with each, acquiring an abundant amount of data I then used to “story stance,” resulting in the narrative portraits featured in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Significance of the Study

Teacher research has been both marginalized and trivialized within the larger educational research landscape (Foshay, 1998; Irvin, 2005; Klehr, 2009; Snow-Gerono, 2003). Nevertheless, a growing number of scholars champion the merits of its various iterations, such as action research and practitioner inquiry (e.g. Blumenreich, 2015; Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehr, & Zeichner, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Meyers & Rust, 2003). This study endeavors to join their ranks while subsequently answering calls for more social histories of teaching in general and
teacher research in particular (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001; Cohen & Scheer, 1997; Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015; Huberman, 1996; Klehr, 2009). By focusing expressly on inquiry as stance, my work contributes to existing literature regarding its invisible yet palpable nature (Amond, 2008; Copeland, Birmingham, de la Cruz, & Lewin, 1993; Dana, 2015; Hulburt & Knotts, 2012; Rowe, 2015). My participants’ stories, contextualized through my interpretive lens, testify to the endurance of inquiry as stance in the Age of Accountability.

Beyond its academic value, this study is also significant from a practical standpoint, poised to inspire the next generation of teacher researchers. Scholars point to teacher inquiry's power to resist hegemonic forces and inequitable policies (Ravitch, 2014; White, 2013). Teacher researchers’ stories thus offer a model for tomorrow’s transformative teachers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) believe, “across the life span, an inquiry stance provides a kind of grounding within the changing cultures of school reform and competing political agendas” (p. 50). Others have affirmed their belief in the enduring disposition of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Pine, 2009), yet there is a need to substantiate these inspiring claims with real-life examples. Through oral history, this study responds to that need.

**Chapter Summary and Structure of the Dissertation**

This chapter, an introduction to this dissertation, provided relevant background information to contextualize the study’s purpose: to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools. An overview of the research design briefly demonstrated how the methods align with the
research questions. Lastly, this chapter articulated the study’s scholarly and practical significance.

Chapter 2 is a review of related literature, including a detailed explanation of inquiry as stance and a description of the theoretical assumptions guiding this research. As indicated earlier, Chapter 3 elaborates on the study design, and Chapters 4, 5, and 6 feature the participants’ individual narrative portraits, thoroughly introducing readers to Cindy Ballenger, Gail Ritchie, and Erik Shager, 3 long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance. Chapter 7 is a stand-alone manuscript in response to the first research question: What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? Reducing Chapters 4, 5, and 6 to mini-narrative form, I highlight the definitive characteristics that comprise my participants’ enduring stance: 1) playful curiosity, 2) critical awareness, 3) a willingness to be disturbed (Wheatley, 2009), 4) humble empathy, and 5) optimistic leadership and advocacy. Next, I turn to the contexts and constraints of long-term teacher researchers in Chapter 8, a stand-alone manuscript in response to my second research question: What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? By examining the backdrop of my narrators’ stories, I ultimately argue it is the people within those places who have contributed so profoundly to their enduring inquiry stance.

Having elected to write an article-style dissertation, I acknowledge some readers may be interested in going straight to Chapter 7 and/or 8. Likewise, readers who have carefully perused the extended narratives in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 may choose to skip the mini-narrative versions featured in Chapter 7. As a narrative-based study, this dissertation lends itself to a multiplicity of readings, corresponding to a variety of
audiences. Readers are invited to explore the storied stance of these long-term teacher researchers in accordance with their own interests and inclinations. Incidentally, Chapter 9—in addition to serving as a summary for the dissertation as a whole by reviewing the implications this study holds for teachers, teacher educators, and historians—also voices my own interests and inclinations by outlining the directions I intend to take in my scholarly journey.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

As introduced in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools. This chapter surveys the literature that informed my research, placing the study in conversation with several bodies of scholarship, including teacher research and its variants, with a focus on the construct of inquiry as stance; teacher identity as socially constructed, inherently narrative, and ideally agentic; and the use of counter-storytelling to resist dominant, hegemonic narratives like those introduced in Chapter 1. I begin by tracing the emergence and development of the inquiry stance construct as related to existing studies of teacher research and teacher researchers.

A Brief History of Inquiry as Stance

The concept of inquiry as stance forms the core of the research questions driving this study: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? Thus, it is important to ground the study in a review of literature related to this construct, which arose within the larger discourse of teacher research. Teacher research, likewise, sits within a broader sphere of practitioner research or action research, which has enabled nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, and other such practitioners to glean constructive understandings of their work and how to make that work better (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Ravitch, 2014). Within the realm of education, teacher research also enjoys a vast array of applications, all of which exemplify “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and
curiously, teacher research continues “even as waves of reform and centrally mandated edicts [have] washed over schools, demanding uniformity and conformity to lessons and pedagogy invented outside the classroom” (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001, p. 235). By focusing on the rich histories of individual teacher researchers who exhibit an inquiry stance, my study aims to better understand the past and present of teacher research to advocate for its future. Because any discussion of the “living practice” of inquiry merits consideration of its “animated, evolving” nature (Klehr, 2009, p. 5), I turn now to a historical overview of teacher research before focusing specifically on inquiry as stance, the philosophy that I believe accounts for the staying power of teacher research.

**Teacher Research**

McFarland and Stansell (1993) trace inquiry all the way to Aristotle, while the origin of teacher research is more readily attributed to John Dewey, who encouraged educators to be “consumers and producers of knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 9). In so doing, teachers need to resist “the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value” and “endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance,” engaging in reflection marked by “judgment suspended during further inquiry” (Dewey, 1910, p. 13). This paradoxically unites motion and stasis, enabling one “to maintain the state of doubt” while simultaneously engaging in “systematic and protracted inquiry” (p. 13). Garte (2017) thus envisions a Dewey-inspired didact as one who can “constantly assess, collect and analyze data from the classroom with the rigor of a scientist, […] observe the impact of their interventions and […] constantly tweak, adjust and in some cases abandon entirely their planned instruction” (p. 15). This image underscores the scientific approach that characterized early forms of teacher research.
Dewey’s acknowledgment of the potential pain and confusion in this process highlights what he believed to be prerequisites for learning (Ermeling, 2010). As a pragmatist, Dewey grounded these abstractions in the activity of everyday life, advocating collective, scientific deliberation as the “guiding orientation” of a democratic society (Hammersley, 2004, p. 169). Moreover, as a prominent figure in the Progressive Era, Dewey idealized educators as “society’s most potentially powerful agents of change” (White, 2013, p. 40), but only when they unite theory and practice to find the overlap of “common sense knowing” and “scientific doing” (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, pp. 188-189) that came to define action research. The job-embedded quality of practitioner inquiry, wherein teachers research what is directly relevant and applicable to their work, remains a defining feature (Emery & Saunders, 2018), ably continuing Dewey’s legacy.

Ostensibly taking a cue from Dewey, and likewise inspired by the work of John Collier, psychologist Kurt Lewin pondered and promoted the intermingling of theoretical and practical knowledge in the 1940s (Winter, 1987). As Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Collier had sought, through collaborative action research, to replace “deeply discriminatory, racist, and destructive practices” towards Native Americans with “more democratic policies” (Pine, 2009, p. 38). He thus brought a critical edge to the nascent philosophy of practitioner inquiry, echoing Dewey’s belief in the “inherently reflexive” and incomplete nature of knowledge (Winter, 1987, p. 50). These elements live on in practitioners who “ask hard questions of [them]selves” and “seek out disconfirming evidence” to develop more socially just pedagogy (LaBoskey, 2009, p. 74). Moreover, today’s cooperative inquiry groups appear to benefit “teachers from populations with traditionally high levels of attrition,” including those who “feel isolated
and (at times) marginalized" (Bower-Phipps, Cruz, Albaladejo, Johnson, & Homa, 2016, pp. 3, 5). Nearly a century ago, John Collier had analogous aims, uniting epistemic humility and collective action for social change.

Collier’s emphasis on the social justice potential of action research appealed to Kurt Lewin, a Jewish émigré who had fled Europe in the 1930s (Benade, 2015; Kemmis, 1980). Challenging the hegemonic force of both basic science and the burgeoning social science fields, Lewin’s tolerance for ambiguity and willingness to employ qualitative methodology brought attention to the concept of action research as he further defined it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; McFarland & Stansell, 1993; Pine, 2009; Winter, 1987). Although he was working in psychology rather than in education, Lewin, like Dewey, sought a more harmonious relationship between theory and practice, achievable through an iterative spiral of hypotheses and actions (Hammersley, 2004; Noffke, 1995). Beyond striving for practical efficiency, these efforts truly sought participatory, democratic social change (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), a discernible continuation of Collier’s work and a lasting feature of teacher research (Fulmer & Bodner, 2017; MacDonald & Weller, 2017; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

Stephen Corey (1953) wove these philosophical threads together in a classroom context, urging practitioners’ “continuous and thoughtful” evaluation of their pedagogy (p. viii). Privileging scientific approaches over common-sense problem-solving, Corey held a decidedly positivist orientation (Hammersely, 2004), but his emphasis on cooperative practitioner research continued the legacy of his forebears (McFarland & Stansell, 1993). Indeed, Hodgkinson (1957) links Corey’s version of action research to Progressive education, and Corey (1952) arguably channeled Dewey when he noticed
how educators feel “qualified to consume research, but not to engage in it” (p. 478).

Thus, Corey sought to democratize action research during the 1950s, in part by making it seem simple (Dodman, Groth, Ra, Baker, & Ramezan, 2017). Today’s inquirers might question that move, preferring to “delve into the dilemmas and contradictions that arise from teaching” rather than adhere to “a narrowly defined, scientific experiment that focuses on certainty and measurable objectivity that might result in quick fixes” (Kim, 2013, p. 380). Nevertheless, in the Cold War climate, with America’s global standing at stake, Corey’s (1949) efforts to upend the hierarchy of educational research earned recognition as well as scrutiny, attracting fierce methodological and epistemological concerns (Hodgkinson, 1957; Irvin, 2005; Kemmis, 1980; Wiles, 1953).

Though action research declined in the late 1950s in favor of top-down and therefore allegedly top-notch practices (Efron, 2005), it endured, in part, by dividing into two strains. While some scholars clung to the language of scientific—even clinical— inquiry, urging teachers, for example, to conduct “a diagnosis of the priority needs for change” (Jung & Lippitt, 1966, p. 25, emphasis mine), others celebrated the grassroots aspect of action research as markedly different from sterile, formal research (Hammersley, 2004; Odell, 1976; Shumsky & Mukerji, 1962). These disparate factions shared a vision of teacher research as a vehicle for change, necessarily at odds with schools’ remarkable stability and conservatism. Even that, it seems, was “a phenomenon to be explained and understood” (Hinely & Ponder, 1979, p. 136), particularly through postmodern and feminist lenses (Pine, 2009). The gradual acceptance of qualitative methodology thus revived and reinvigorated action research.
Klehr (2012) stresses the uphill journey of qualitative research to become “a legitimate form of academic inquiry” as an important component of the history of teacher research (p. 125). Individual inquirers relive this history on a smaller scale when “the challenges of handling qualitative data” constitute “a particularly steep, but important learning curve” (Emery & Saunders, 2018, para. 14). Though teacher researchers can and do employ a diverse range of methods, tailoring their approach in pragmatic response to their surroundings (Klehr, 2009), qualitative methods—and the principles behind them—readily align with the goals of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Klehr, 2012), suggesting vigor, rather than rigor, should be the inquirer’s aim.

Dell Hymes (1977), one of the first card-carrying linguistic anthropologists, understood this to be true when he encouraged his colleagues to engage teachers in ethnographic research “to unite research with effective change” (p. 170). While not discounting the value of quantitative social science, he unabashedly chose a side:

A mode of research that focuses on experimental design, quantitative techniques, and the impersonality of the investigator has its place; but, carried to its perfection, as the exclusive mode, it would tend to divide society into those who know and those who are known. The anthropological recognition of the contribution of the practitioner as one who also knows counteracts that tendency. (Hymes, 1980, p. 7)

Narrative modes, in particular, despite presenting a methodological challenge, were, for Hymes, “more accessible to the citizens of society” and more likely to “legitimate the form in which most citizens’ knowledge of their circumstances is cast” (p. 7). His passion for educational ethnology found unique expression in the Penn Ethnography Forum, which he founded in 1980, spawning a Teacher Researcher Day by the end of the decade (Hornberger, 2002). Hymes’s legacy lives on in practitioners who seek “valuable insights into the lives of their students” and consequently gravitate towards
“rigorous teacher-ethnography” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 2473). Still, questions related to the legitimacy and validity of teacher research methodology persist, both among and outside of the teacher research community (Klehr, 2009).

Immersed in this debate in the late 1970s and early ’80s, Lawrence Stenhouse readily embraced more interpretive, dialectical modes (Huberman, 1996; McFarland & Stansell, 1993). Confronting generalizability concerns head-on, he demonstrated how teacher research might transcend classroom walls through constructive dialogue (Stevenson, 1995). Kemmis (1980) endorsed such attention to the “lived experience” of schooling (p. 3), and together, Carr and Kemmis (1986) advocated for richer discussion of the epistemology of practitioner research, to “arm it against criticism and promote its future progress” (p. 1). These efforts succeeded: by the 1990s, teacher research grew widespread enough to be recognized as mainstream (Huberman, 1996; Noffke, 1995; Snow-Gerono, 2003). The noticeably “bursting” movement challenged “the exclusive claim of the university professor as the ‘scientist-theorist’” (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001, p. 235), yet increased attention also invited criticism along epistemological, methodological, and political fronts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

The first two battle lines were nothing new, echoing longstanding concerns about the credibility and rigor of social science (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Huberman, 1996; van Manen, 1990). For the most part, inquiry advocates resisted calls to develop a formula for teacher research, not wanting product to supersede process and suspicious of overly technical approaches to teaching and learning (Allwright, 2005; Pine, 2009; Stevenson, 1995). Where teacher inquiry as a form of professional development flourished (Sardo-Brown, Welsh, & Bolton, 1995), pushing back on more
remedial forms (Lytle, 1996), the nuance and narrative of qualitative methods continued to be especially apropos (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015; Nelson, Slavit, & Deuel, 2012; Richardson, 1994). Nevertheless, epistemological and methodological concerns gained an audience during the 1990s, incorporating ethical dilemmas endemic to teacher research. Wong (1995), for example, disapprovingly cited the tensions associated with juggling two roles, openly flouting Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1993) bold unwillingness to privilege research over teaching and reinforcing the historically low status of teacher research (Hammer & Schifter, 2001; Sardo-Brown et al., 1995). Undeterred, proponents of teacher inquiry embraced tension as a valuable source of organic questions, the pursuit of which promised real and lasting school improvement (Baumann, 1996; Richardson, 1994).

Various qualms about teacher inquiry, including suspicions about the validity of qualitative research, were amplified in the Age of Accountability (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Massey, 2002; McFarland & Stansell, 1993). As reformers touted narrowly defined best practices and standardized curricula, school culture often inhibited teacher research (Baumann, 1996; Hursh, 1995), pitting innovative practitioners against “established conceptions” of teaching and learning (Wong, 1995, p. 27). This, then, was the third battle line: an inherently political critique of teachers as researchers. Acknowledging the paradox that teachers require supportive administrators to engage in work that critiques the very institutions they inhabit, Stevenson (1995) nevertheless cautioned against “depoliticized” action research (p. 205). Others likewise celebrated inquiry’s power to contest the status quo, viewing the political nature of teacher research as inextricably bound to its epistemological, ontological, and methodological
foundations (Anderson & Herr, 1999). As a means by which “practitioners make full use of what they know” (Foshay, 1998, p. 109), teacher research required a distinct “set of political commitments […] and a moral and ethical stance that recognizes the improvement of human life as a goal” (Noffke, 1995, p. 4). At the dawn of the twenty-first century, as teacher researchers coalesced around a critique of the sociopolitical climate in schools, the construct of inquiry as stance supplied powerful lifeblood.

**Inquiry as Stance**

Teacher research, practitioner research, teacher inquiry, and practitioner inquiry operate quite successfully as interchangeable terms despite their distinct histories (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014), yet “inquiry” conjures both a way of knowing and being (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Fulmer, 2012; Klehr, 2009), honoring the epistemological and ontological perspectives of teacher researchers. Inquirers see the world as “something to study, to explore, [and] to wonder about,” and “when teachers breathe inquiry as a part of their lives,” they contagiously invite students to do likewise (Wolk, 2008, pp. 116, 118). Inherently constructionist (Copeland et al., 1993; So, 2013), inquiry conveys teachers’ attempts—whether pre- or in-service—to make sense of their own teaching (Amond, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Snow-Gerono, 2003), using the “technology” of practitioner research (Allwright, 2005). The researcher’s insider status is a valuable feature (Schaenen, Kohnen, Flinn, Saul, & Zeni, 2012), celebrated most prominently in Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1993) *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*.

At the turn of the 21st century, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) officially coined the phrase inquiry as stance, further developing their theory as *Race to the Top* supplanted *No Child Left Behind* in the educational policy landscape. The aptly titled
Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) cast teachers as “deliberative intellectuals,” capable of navigating the “productive and generative tensions” that result when boundaries blur (pp. 2, 94). In the early 1990s, Patterson and Shannon (1993) had forcefully called for a “redefined rigor [that] requires teachers to take responsibility for their work and to be changed by their research” (p. 10). The inquiry stance arguably answers that call, lending a necessary rigor—or better yet, vigor—to teacher research. Rather than connoting a rigid, inflexible, position, the inquiry stance is a disposition, at once active and meditative, ontological and epistemological, microscopic and macroscopic, and personal and political (Benade, 2015; Fulmer, 2012).

Teacher research has long supported inquiry that “stimulates, intensifies, and illuminates changes” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 51), yet the inquiry stance for the new millennium urges an “underlying cultural change” (Rinke & Stebick, 2013, p. 72). Inquiry as stance honors the transformational agency of teachers (Irvin, 2005; Rowe, 2015; Schaenen et al., 2012), espousing “a radically different view” of knowledge, practice, and change (Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015, p. 10). When teacher researchers possess an inquiry stance, they reflect rearward for the sake of change (Ravitch, 2014) while conscious of “the immediate and continuous present” (Benade, 2015, p. 110). This fosters a cyclical rhythm in pursuit of an ever-evolving goal (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Ermeling, 2010; Wolk, 2008). Investigations take on an iterative nature in which “findings are a beginning” because they “raise questions about and prompt reflection on past practice in order to inform and change future practice” (Nelson et al., 2012, p. 19).
Practitioners with an inquiry stance thoughtfully look back and intentionally look forward, continually posing problems of practice to improve teaching and learning.

Problems, in this sense, are not pejorative (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). Rather, teacher researchers welcome the challenge of inquiry—even as a time- and labor-intensive or emotionally taxing process—because it fosters deep, professional learning (Baumann, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Hamilton, 2017). When educators inquire in “a continual cycle […] throughout their professional lifetimes,” they embody “a professional positioning or stance, […] where questioning, systematically studying, and subsequently improving [their] practice becomes a necessary and natural part of [their] work” (Dana, 2015, pp. 163-164).

Necessary and natural, intentional and flexible, grounded and evolving, the inquiry stance enables teachers to harness daily “praxidents” (Schiera, 2014, p. 108). As a construct, inquiry as stance reconciles the science and the art of teaching and teacher research. Klehr (2009), for instance, defends inquiry’s intentionally “open design” as “intellectually rigorous” and indicative of the “multidisciplinary” mindset of teacher researchers, who act as “bricoleurs” in response to their surroundings (pp. 7, 31). Here, as elsewhere, I maintain that vigor is a more appropriate term, capturing the living and active curiosity of practitioners with an inquiry stance.

Teachers with an inquiry stance persevere in the Age of Accountability with “a reinvigorated sense” of evidence-based practice (Ravitch, 2014, p. 6). Whereas action research has noticeably neglected its potential for “advancing social justice and emancipatory change” (Kinsler, 2010, p. 172), the inquiry stance takes action research “to the next level,” beyond “an event or task” and towards a fully embedded mindset that
views professional development and social justice as inextricably bound and mutually reinforcing (Irvin, 2005, p. 9). Extending far beyond the boundaries of a teacher preparation program, the inquiry stance promotes sustainable, authentic professional learning for a lifetime (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Dana, 2015; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). It bears repeating that the very words *inquiry stance* capture the inside-outside, push-pull, grounded and dynamic qualities of the teacher researcher, whose short-term goal is local change in the sense of improved practice, but who ultimately exercises a sort of “epistemological power” (Anderson & Herr, 1999, p. 17), ready and willing “to expand possibilities for practice” writ large (Burns Thomas, 2004, p. 18). This requires critical self-awareness, courage, confidence, and a keen sense of the connections between individual reflections and the larger sociopolitical world (Benade, 2015; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Pine, 2009; Schaenen et al., 2012).

True to its roots in Dewey, the inquiry stance is an “attitude toward understanding classroom life,” marked by “continuing responsiveness” to problems of practice (Copeland et al., 1993, p. 349), which are celebrated, named, and systematically studied (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Dewey, however, tends to describe teaching “as a solitary, disassociated activity” (White, 2013, p. 39), whereas the inquiry stance is fundamentally dialogical, such that “even a teacher doing solo research in the classroom can engage others: students, parents, outside observers” (Schaenen et al., 2012, p. 80). Ideally, collaboration occurs in communities of practice, marked by sustained, transformational negotiation (Dana & Currin, 2017; Grant & Murray, 1999; So, 2013) and shared “habits of mind or ways of being” (Nelson et al., 2012, p. 5) because the inquiry stance is epistemological and ontological at its core. When inquiry
communities embody this philosophical foundation, they “regard educational problems and issues not solely as individual matters but also as social, cultural, and political concerns that may require collective action” (Lytle, 1996, p. 93). Through a literal co-laboring, practitioner inquirers are positioned—and dispositioned—to transform schools and society.

Given the history and philosophy of inquiry as stance, there is a surprising gap in the literature regarding long-term teacher researchers. This dissertation, as an oral history of that very population, can inform our understanding of teaching as “a complex activity that occurs within webs of social, historical, cultural, and political significance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 50) and substantiate visions of “lifelong learners” who are “finely tuned to particular and local histories, cultures, and communities” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 144). Achieving these aims requires a solid grasp of the history of teacher research as well as a familiarity with existing studies of the lives of teacher researchers (e.g. Bennett, 2013; Cochran-Smith, 2015; Hitchens, 2004; Snow-Gerono, 2003; Vanderburg, 2013). Drawing from these scholars, who focus on the onset of the inquiry stance and its benefit to pre-service or early-career teachers, my study takes the long view, taking into consideration the shifting contexts in which teachers inquire. Here, too, I turn to existing research (e.g. Anderson & Herr, 1999; Isakson & Boody, 1993; Sardo-Brown et al., 1995), drawing on the theoretical framework below to fill the scholarly void on long-term teacher researchers in the Age of Accountability.

**Theories of Identity**

Not wishing to add to the pile of under-theorized life-history studies (Peacock & Holland, 1993), I devote the remainder of this chapter to the theoretical assumptions that guided my research. Because of my aim to study the enduring inquiry stance of
long-term teacher researchers, this dissertation inherently focuses on identity. Studies of this sort can illuminate “the impact of situations, events or specific contexts,” as well as “the uniqueness of participants” (Johnston, 2012, p. 1), ably encompassing both of my research questions. As I explain in Chapter 3, participants had to be identified—and identify—as having an inquiry stance. Thus, I draw on existing literature on teacher identity, which I view as socially constructed, inherently narrative, and ideally agentic. Elaborating on these aspects, I also articulate their connection to teacher research, placing my study in conversation with the work of other scholars.

**Sociocultural Theories**

My second research question—What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance?—is emblematic of my sociocultural perspective. It presumes, like sociocultural theorists do, that individual identity cannot be separated from social context (Johnston, 2012; Olsen, 2008; Wortham, 2004). This dissertation, which focuses on individual long-term teacher researchers, openly considers the participants in relation to their surroundings, which provide them with “resources to construct self-understanding” (Wortham, 2004, p. 165). Who we are—or who we understand ourselves to be—implicates where and when we are; what we do; and what we think, feel, and believe (Poulet, 1972). Thus, in pursuit of my first question—What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance?—I recognize the characteristics of long-term teacher researchers are products, in part, of their “social histories” (Olsen, 2008, p. 24), even as they interact in dynamic ways with their environments. This is especially true given how teacher researchers often rely on collaboration, though Klehr (2009) asserts, “inquiry is, by nature, a socially constructed practice” (p. 33), group or no group. Teachers’ knowledge, like teachers themselves, is
historically situated, deriving “from interactions with people and ideas” (Klehr, 2012, p. 124, emphasis mine). My participants’ inquiry stance and how they make sense of it inevitably relates to the world in which they live, learn, and lead.

Education scholars with a sociocultural perspective have examined “the situated, ever-changing ways in which teachers are forever ‘becoming,’” even turning to teacher research for insights into teacher identity (Olsen, 2008, p. 38). A key principle of sociocultural theory holds that identity is a process. Wortham (2004), for instance, asserts, “neither the individual nor the society is prior. Both are in motion, and they codevelop” (p. 165). Applying this to education, Olsen (2008) investigated how teachers’ experiences as students—particularly those occurring prior to the “top-down policy mandates, prescriptive curricula, and strict teacher accountability measures” of the No Child Left Behind era—“mediated their teacher education” (pp. 33, 35). Consequently, he proposes a “circular” yet “forward-moving” model of teacher identity, in which, “a teacher is always collapsing the past, present, and future into a complex mélange of professional beliefs, goals, memories, and predictions” (p. 24). My study, by examining long-term teacher researchers, continues this work and yields insight on multiple levels. I address the ongoing nature of identity (Johnston, 2012), and specifically teacher researcher identity, while at the same time providing testimony for history of education archives about the shifting school contexts that have shaped and been shaped by my participants. Olsen (2008) calls for “explicit ways to make teacher identity more visible to novice teachers” who might “learn from their pasts” even as they prepare for their future (p. 37). Acknowledging identity itself as storied takes a decisive step towards answering this call.
Identity as Narrative

Narrative scholars contend, “experience is the stories people live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi), particularly when people discuss those experiences with others (Dalton, 2017). This merits consideration of several related assumptions. Stories have characters, settings, beginnings, endings, and ideally some measure of plot-driving conflict. These elements have clear analogs in life: there could be no stories without humans. However, Sfard and Prusak (2005) insist identities are stories, especially those considered “reifying, endorsable, and significant” (p. 16, emphasis theirs). While this conception of identity makes it “reasonably accessible and investigable,” they, like other sociocultural theorists, stress the ongoing nature of life, so “it is the activity of identifying rather than its end product that is of interest to the researcher” (p. 17)—the telling of the story rather than any one, true version. This raises the question of authorship, which is—for good reason—etymologically linked to authority. When people tell their own stories, they inevitably exert control over them, particularly to shape a coherent narrative for a given audience (Chakraborty, 2017; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Pamphilon, 1999). Narrated identity, in other words, “varies with circumstance, […] so that one’s self is seen less as an anchor and source of narration than a product of it” (Peacock & Holland, 1993, p. 368). This dissertation grapples with identity in narrative terms on at least two levels: I invited my participants to share their professional life stories with me so that I, in turn, could story stance for my audience. These theoretical assumptions operate in both cases.

Despite widespread consensus on “identities as man-made and collectively shaped” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 16), what to do with life stories is up for debate. Peacock and Holland (1993) outline—and summarily dismiss—two competing
approaches from the social sciences. The first, which is “life-focused,” treats an individual narrative “as a trace of some external reality that is more important than the story itself” (p. 368). Charming personal details notwithstanding, what matters is the external referent. The equally problematic alternative, the “story-focused” approach, “gives primacy to the form of the narrative” (p. 370). Dispensing with these, the authors endorse interdisciplinary and multifaceted “processual approaches” that “give a fuller account” of how storied identities operate “as cultural, social, and psychological constructions” (p. 373). This perspective readily resonates with views of teacher research as a means of taking “fuller account” of life in schools (Pine, 2009, p. 25). The inquiry stance, in other words, is inherently storied in that it inspires teacher researchers to flip the script, so to speak, by continually promoting positive change.

If identity is narrative, then identity is historical, what Holland and Lave (2009) refer to as “history-in-person” (p. 4). Stories of self are situated within distinct sociohistorical circumstances that are constantly in flux. Because of this, Adams (2017) asserts that identity is “shaped both by the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us” (p. 163). Scholars from a number of fields have pointed to the intersubjective nature of the narrated self, which encapsulates an ongoing struggle between our self-told stories and dominant social narratives (Dalton, 2017; Wolgemuth, 2014). For teachers in particular, a long view of these daily dealings can illustrate teacher identity as well as teacher learning, since educators “author themselves” over the course of their careers (Adams, 2017, p. 163). Inviting teachers to share these stories in interviews positions them as “as active deconstructors, rather than just constructors, of stories, meanings, and self” (Wolgemuth, 2014, p. 589, emphasis hers).
Grumet (1990) characterizes all of education as a narrative enterprise, yoking past, present, and future—or “being and history and possibility”—in the free-form process of “making sense of our lives in the world” (para. 13, 19). By undertaking such a project, I join these scholars in affirming identity as narrative—and ideally agentic.

**Identity as Agentic**

Like identity itself, agency is subject to sociohistorical forces, which operate throughout an individual’s lifetime, prompting Buchanan (2015) to define agency as “identities in motion” (p. 714). Thus, teachers continue to develop beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of their preparation programs, ideally taking advantage of opportunities to reflect so they might “make and remake themselves” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 705). This process of renewal can be hindered or helped by a given milieu, hence Brookfield’s (1993) sociocultural study of the “political context, cultural contingency, and social construction of self-directed learning activities” (p. 228). Rubin and Land (2017), likewise, explore teachers’ contextual and ongoing identity development, noting how “tensions” can in fact be “generative,” spurring “improvisation and agency,” which are “vital forces” (p. 197). The question of agency thus acts in concert with the view of identity as narrative: are we both authors of and subjects in our lives, or are we subjected to the authorial—or authoritative—whims of others?

Scholars of teacher agency acknowledge it is not always a given. Cremin and Baker (2010), for example, discovered teachers often view themselves as strong readers—and rightly so, yet they are less likely to identify as strong writers, battling “interpersonal, institutional and intrapersonal influences” to activate their “authorial agency” as writing instructors (p. 21). Relatedly, Lawrence (2017) asserts that “People with histories in undervalued professional groups, like schoolteachers, may be
especially susceptible to impostor syndrome” (p. 204), with a longer road or a steeper climb to fulfill their agentic scholarly potential. When teachers harness the power of narrative to “construct and contest their identities,” they can question and act upon their surroundings (Downey, 2015, p. 5). These efforts inevitably impact students, who benefit from thinking of “teacher as text,” a strategy that “challenge[s] traditional notions of teacher as infallible Author(ity)” and invites active deconstruction of ideas (Jacobs, 1998, p. 223). Jacobs celebrates this lack of rigidity as evidence that reflective and agentic teachers yield reflective and agentic students, ostensibly helped by a narrative view of identity.

Other scholars focus specifically on the personality traits of agentic teachers. One such study describes them as “open to new ideas” and motivated “to experiment in their classroom in a planned and systematic way” (van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard, & Popeijus, 2015, p. 692), definitive characteristics of teacher researchers. Practitioners with an inquiry stance are, like the teachers in this study, able “to learn from and through their work, from and with colleagues” (p. 695), ideally for the course of their careers. Unwilling to “blindly embrace all changes” (p. 692), they take a critical stance for the sake of their students. Thus, my study, like the work of van der Heijden et al., has implications for teacher education: investigating the qualities of exceptional teachers naturally raises the question of how to find and/or foster more of their kind, and instilling “a career-long habit of practitioner research” (Bower-Phipps et al., 2016, p. 11) likely requires intentional effort on the part of teacher educators.

Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, and Enz (2000) compiled an instructive taxonomy of teachers’ developmental phases, a more expansive approach than prior attempts
(Huberman, 1993). Their passing mention of action research is reason enough to inform my study, but the chapters on expert and emeritus teachers are especially useful. Experts are, unsurprisingly, exceptional, likely to be National Board-Certified and “view themselves as members of a profession whose boundaries extend beyond the schoolhouse” (Bray, Kramer, & LePage, 2000, p. 77). These accolades are well earned, as experts are known for “recognizing and overcoming” obstacles, exhibiting “proactive and anticipatory teaching” (pp. 77-78). Like experts, emeritus teachers delight in cycles of reflection and renewal, having actively facilitated their own growth throughout their careers (Dagenais, Stefy, & Enz, 2000). Retired in name only, they are willing and able to remain in the field, albeit “on their own terms and in their own ways,” even to the point of student-focused political activism (p. 96). My study extends this work, devoting much-deserved attention—and appreciation—to these unique and exceptional teachers.

**Identity of Teacher Researchers**

Citing a lack of empirical attention to teacher researcher identity, Taylor (2017) used a sociocultural framework to examine how teacher educators and their students can co-construct identities, using narrative to “demystify what it mean[s] to be a teacher researcher” and promote the use of inquiry beyond graduation (p. 23). Baker and Milner (2016) likewise testify to the transformative power of teacher research, suggesting it contributes to pre-service teachers’ ability to define themselves and “exercise authority” (p. 99). In addition to lowering the chance of attrition or burnout, taking ownership of their identity in this manner also inspires them to become teacher leaders. Other teacher educators have examined how “contextual factors within the first year of teaching work to enhance or dampen” their graduates’ inquiry stance, and by extension, their agency (Dodman et al., 2017, p. 31). Fulmer and Bodner (2017) describe a waning
in post-graduation teacher inquiry, despite efforts to instill the habit. They draw a curious distinction between the delimiting effect of action research and the "liberatory" vibe of practitioner inquiry, which "urges teachers to look into narratives of their own lives, both within and beyond school walls, as not only teachers but as racialized, classed, and gendered humans enacting curriculum in this politicized world" (p. 9). They believe an inquiry stance can sustain teachers in this fraught professional context, but it remains to be seen how to sustain the inquiry stance itself. Thus, my study extends this scholarship, looking well beyond a teacher’s first years.

Kim (2013) conceives of teacher action research as Bildung, borrowing the ontological term from Gadamer to describe “the emergence of one’s character as distinct or unique” yet concomitantly informed by “social roles that one plays” (p. 383). This application honors Gadamer’s belief that the modern predilection for rigorous scientific inquiry is epistemologically limiting. At the same time, Kim channels Dewey to show how Bildung frames action research as “an ever-present, never ending process of professional development in which teachers engage in a pedagogical journey with ups and downs, challenges, struggles, dilemmas, and meaning-making” (p. 392). Crucially, this renders the “technical managerial” conception of teaching obsolete (p. 391), granting teacher researchers authorial license to “claim their autonomy and agency” and enhance both their “being and becoming” (pp. 380-381). This work-in-progress quality is part and parcel of inquiry, echoing sociocultural theories that associate identity with “being or having,” since

Identifying is an attempt to overcome the fluidity of change by collapsing a video clip into a snapshot. [...] Identity talk makes us able to cope with new situations in terms of our past experience and gives us tools to plan for the future. (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 16, emphasis theirs)
This dissertation, which features participants who are long-term teacher researchers and have an inquiry stance, thus offers insight about how such practitioners cope with “the fearful educational climate” in the Age of Accountability (Klehr, 2009, p. 175) to endure as justice-oriented agents of change.

**Counter-Narratives**

People are storied, and stories are peopled. Both are value-laden, and yet also, at times, undervalued. Slim and Thompson (1995) point to “the bias of the educated and political elite,” which unjustly dismisses oral testimony as anecdotal (p. 150). People’s stories, they contend, are vital for understanding “how partial the views of outsiders are” (p. 55). This study operates from a similar premise, echoing Adams’s (2017) belief that “With access to rich accounts of teachers’ lives, assumptions about practice are forced to surface and thus, can be interrogated and possibly revised” (p. 168). My purpose, to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools, is therefore unabashedly critical, taking a counter-storytelling perspective. Both research questions—the first considering long-term teacher researchers’ identities as socially constructed, narrative, and agentic; and the second delving into the sociocultural contexts that have, over time, contributed thereto—lend themselves to the critical practice of counter-storytelling, which I explore below.

The postmodern era of the mid- to late-20th century witnessed a toppling of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) as scholars embraced the idea of multiple—and therefore destabilizing—perceptions. From this premise, Chia and Morgan (1996) surmise, “socially constructed and socially sustained” realities can thankfully “be other than what they are,” meaning “we need not necessarily capitulate to the dominant
regimes” (p. 55). While some might panic in the face of uncertainty, others, such as narrative scholars, celebrate the postmodern turn. Clandinin and Connelly (1990), for instance, are decidedly unbothered that “narrative explanations of one’s past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty” (para. 5), while Patton and Catching (2009) note, “Our worlds comprise and are constructed around stories” (p. 713), which can be deconstructed just as readily as they can be pluralized.

In terms of identity, this paradigm shift rejects the modernist view of selfhood “as a fixed and knowable entity that we each possess” (Johnston, 2012, p. 3). Instead, identity encompasses “knowledge, feelings, values and beliefs” (p. 5), reflecting the sociocultural views described in the section above. One group of researchers takes this idea to a playful extreme, using a sandbox metaphor to illustrate “scholarly identity development and meaning making” (McDonald, Craig, Markello, & Kahn, 2016, p. 1145). A sandbox, they explain, connotes “free play, risk taking, and creative expression,” as well as a site for formative social interaction and experimentation, in that “sands can be patted, molded, shifted, and raked in order to create new structures, add to existing ones, or even tear down old ones” (p. 1145). This frame guided their efforts to story and restory themselves while welcoming a “multiplicity of voices” (p. 1147).

Adopting a multi-vocal perspective is not just about the nuance within a single subject or story. Rather, the postmodern lens also allows for marginalized voices to articulate and critique their marginalization by speaking directly to the univocal status quo. Feminist scholars, for instance, use counter-narrative to honor and affirm the nation’s predominantly female teaching force as “subjects in their own right, not as mere objects of research” (Casey, 1990, para. 2). Following the lead of critical race theorists,
they amplify “experiential knowledge” to challenge “multiple layers of oppression” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). When counter-stories “capture experiences which have been unaccounted for, dismissed, or obliterated in dominant narratives” (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012, p. 294), they shed critical light on situated stories of injustice.

Though counter-stories are predominantly associated with efforts for racial justice, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) endorse their use to challenge the assumptions behind all forms of oppression and privilege that go unquestioned as normal and natural while the “majoritarian story distorts and silences” (p. 29). Counter-stories, whether personal or told on behalf of someone else, are expressly historical and political, articulating social criticisms with “a human and familiar face” so as to “transform established belief systems” and ultimately “construct another world” (p. 36). My study, by inviting long-term teacher researchers to tell their stories and synthesizing those accounts into a unified text, adopts the counter-narrative aims of “exposing, analyzing, and challenging” (p. 32) master narratives about teachers in America’s public schools.

Patton and Catching (2009) specify that counter-narratives must be “grounded in actual life experiences” (p. 716), like the dominant narratives they wish to challenge. Indeed, it stands to reason each counter-story requires a referent, and Downey (2015) argues an understanding of the master narrative is crucial for recognizing both stories’ implications for the “social actors involved” (p. 6). Master narratives, in both the ways they include and exclude, are durable and self-perpetuating, infecting everything from televisions to textbooks (Gosse, 1995; Hall, 2005; Hartzler-Miller, 2002). Hence, master narratives are especially pertinent to the field of education because of teachers’
unwitting participation in their endurance. I turn now to an overview of accountability-era master narratives before exploring how teacher research offers a powerful alternative.

**Dominant Narratives of Education in the Age of Accountability**

As outlined in Chapter 1, the master narrative of American public schools conveys a story of decline, a problem laid at the feet of teachers, the alleged cause of and solution for the nation’s so-called failing schools and the focus of countless neoliberal reforms (Cochran-Smith, 2015; Cuban, 2009; Farber, 1991; Sugimoto & Carter, 2016). In this climate, Ott’s (2018) definition of neoliberalism is useful due to her constructionist stance: challenging those who treat the concept “as if it possessed a pre-determined historical trajectory or an essential nature,” she argues, “we must study how its social relations develop. We must identify the perpetrators and perpetuators of neoliberalism and hold them accountable” (para. 5). Sugimoto and Carter (2016) arguably do just that, explaining how “the idea of controlling student outcomes through controlling teachers has been and continues to be a central narrative theme” in the Age of Accountability (p. 26), and thereby suggesting its authors can and should be confronted.

Many have questioned the palpable and persistent anxiety over American schools’ global standing on standardized assessments in the decades since *A Nation at Risk* (Busteed, 2018; Sugimoto & Carter, 2016). In fact, two of the report’s authors have since conceded “They started out already alarmed by what they believed was a decline in education, and looked for facts to fit that narrative” (Kamenetz, 2018b, para. 10). Kamenetz demonstrates how disaggregating the data and accounting for expanded access to college tells a very different story: “In the context of declining resources and rising child poverty, maintaining steady or slightly improving test scores over decades
could be described with other words besides ‘flat’ and ‘disappointing’—perhaps ‘surprising’ or ‘heroic’” (para. 47). The master narrative of American schools, however, maintains a headstrong focus on “grades, test scores and graduation rates,” rather than “a more nuanced, qualitative scorecard” (Busteed, 2018, para. 14, 19). Offering a narrow view of student success and “instrumentalist notions of what it means to be a teacher” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 700), the master narrative is intentionally oversimplified and has tremendous staying power.

Worthen (2018) highlights how the narrative of failing schools and blame-worthy educators is not limited to K-12, tracing the “ballooning assessment industry” to the 1980s, when it became “politically convenient” to promote accountability “rather than to scrutinize neoliberal austerity measures” constricting public institutions (para. 3, 9). Though teachers can and should do the scrutinizing, they may be hard-pressed to find the means or the motivation. Neoliberal discourses seep into the consciousness of teachers and students, privileging competition, discouraging collaboration, and thereby causing alienation (Adams, 2017; Wilkins, 2012). Buchanan (2015) suggests these constraints are detrimental to teacher identity, inviting policymakers and researchers to pay closer attention, yet teachers themselves are likely to be “scrutinized and criticized by the media and ever larger segments of the public” (Farber & Wechsler, 1991).

The current administration shows no sign of subverting this story: Trump’s inaugural address rebuked “an education system producing students ‘deprived of all knowledge’” (Will, 2017, para. 3). Such a view of knowledge as static, objective, and transmittable renders the education system a network of transactions: elite academics produce—or at the very least, discover—knowledge; pre-service teachers attend
college to obtain said knowledge; and as certified graduates, woefully mistaken for “finished products” (Rubin & Land, 2017, p. 190), they go forth to dispense their goods, whether to unwitting recipients or willing customers. This process, tantamount to an insensate assembly line, creates “consuming citizens” marked by “an overwhelming degree of homogeneity and conformity” (Darder, 2015, pp. 31, 59). As Eisner (2002) has pointedly observed, “Schools are educational churches, and our gods, judging from the altars we build, are economy and efficiency” (p. 97). The system works, in that education is unmistakably institutionalized and intractably hierarchical, pitting knowledgeable professor over active practitioner (Grant & Murray, 1999), and rigid theory over vital practice (Raelin, 2007).

Wilkins (2012) argues in support of “barriers to protect the spontaneity, creativity and agency of learners from the incursions of market forces, business ontology and bureaucratic administration” (p. 208). Ironically, the creative minds in Hollywood are not much help on this front, stifling creativity in their own way by contributing to detrimental and delimiting narratives about teachers. Ayers (2000) excoriates films that present teachers as “cynical, inept, backward, naive, [and] hopeless” (p. 201), and the delivery-ready curriculum as “immutable and unproblematic” (p. 208), claiming they perpetuate schooling’s association with “control, obedience, [and] hierarchy” and “immunize against a language of possibility” (p. 209). Television, likewise, provides “a distorted sense of the true nature of a teacher’s work” in the form of a “contradictory image: of being able to solve problems that no other social agency seems able to solve and of having an easy job” (Farber & Wechsler, 1991, p. 179). Whether works of fiction feature unrealistic teacher-saviors or “crass, nondedicated educators” with seemingly “unjustifiable”
salaries (Farber & Wechsler, 1991, p. 182), popular culture shapes society’s view of
teachers just like the popular press. Even feel-good hero films rely on the “myth of the
power of the untrained newcomer,” echoing a very real reliance on private
philanthropists devoid of educational expertise to bankroll “unsophisticated, quick-fix
solutions to complex, multifaceted issues” (Sugimoto & Carter, 2016, pp. 33-34).

Though these “deprofessionalizing, dehumanizing” forces are noticeably “far
removed from classroom practice” (Flessner & Klehr, 2016, p. 480), obstacles to
teacher agency are not necessarily external. Rather, as Joseph and Burnaford (2001)
argue, “images of schoolteachers—real teachers who have come before us, public
images, imaginary characters, and perceived roles defined for us by society— influence
how others view us and perhaps how we portray ourselves” (p. vii). Pre-service
teachers, for instance, have often internalized attitudes towards teaching as objective
and technical, hindering their ability to engage in critical reflection (Gay & Kirkland,
2003). These deep-seated beliefs perpetuate the idea that “learning is listening,”
prompting teacher candidates to grasp for universal best practices instead of turning to
inquiry to appreciate the influence of context (Hartzler-Miller, 2002, p. 152).

Neoliberalism’s reach is such that “performativity” becomes “acceptable, legitimate, and
even desirable” (Wilkins, 2012, p. 207). Challenging that is no small feat, but counter-
stories born of self-examination can rectify distorted views within and beyond America’s
schools (Salovey, 2018).

In the Age of Accountability, Ball and Olmedo (2013) take comfort in the view of
identity as always in process and thus malleable by the given historical moment,
encouraging teachers to resist “the rationality of performativity” by problematizing
practice, which “unsettles the mundane and rational truths of neoliberal education and questions the obviousness of things […] to expose the power relations in which they are immersed” (p. 89). This inherently political process takes place on two levels: “an analysis of the structural conditions of the educational system alongside a critical scrutiny” of the self (p. 92). In these managerial, market-driven, high-stakes times, critical, agentic reflection is as important as it is difficult (Adams, 2017; Rubin & Land, 2017). Teacher research can both foster and facilitate a formidable challenge to the dominant neoliberal narrative.

**Teacher Research as Counter-Narrative**

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have long believed the goal of inquiry, “always and in every context—is enhancing students’ learning and life chances for participation in and contribution to a diverse and democratic society” (p. 146). Far from depriving children of all knowledge, teacher researchers affirm their and their students’ capacity to produce it. Consequently, inquirers are motivated to challenge deskilling directives and short-lived, technique-obsessed reform movements (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Bennett, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Efron, 2005; Ermeling, 2010), even in the face of antagonism (Fecho, Price, & Read, 2004; Lippitt, 1981). Far too often, “adverse consequences” result when teachers engage in a “critique of prevailing educational ideologies and policies” (Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007, p. 79), and yet, that is the only way they can transform the status quo.

Indeed, scholarly consensus suggests the Age of Accountability is inherently hostile to teacher research, despite a few claims to the contrary. Testimonies to inquiry’s allegedly undisputable value notwithstanding (Bower-Phipps et al., 2016; Flessner & Klehr, 2016), countless analyses underscore the stark incongruity between
the core philosophy of practitioner inquiry and the neoliberal political climate. Taylor (2017) demonstrates how neoliberal reforms diminish teacher agency, precluding “opportunities to engage in pedagogy that departs from the mandated curriculum, including the recursive inquiry and practice cycle at the heart of teacher research” (p. 23). Klehr (2012), likewise, notes how a metrics-obsessed miasma obscures the more authentic view “of teaching as an intellectual, constructivist act, and classroom research as a dynamic professional process” (p. 126). Even among teacher educators, these troubling trends abound, yet Henning, Dover, Dotson, and Agarwal-Rangath (2018) turn to self-generated counter-narratives to challenge “the rhetoric of rigor” in teacher performance assessments (p. 5), a symptom of “market-driven hyper-accountability mandates presented under the guise of policy reform.” (p. 22). Such policies prevent teachers and teacher educators from tailoring instruction to students’ needs, thus thwarting their efforts to model critical pedagogy for their students. Despite all of this, if teaching is, itself, “an act of inquiry,” as well as “essentially a political act” (LaBoskey, 2009, p. 73), openly engaging in teacher research as counter-narrative would seem to be a moral imperative in the Age of Accountability.

As a self-directed endeavor, teacher research inherently runs counter to the top-down status quo (Brookfield, 1993; Burnaford & Hobson, 2001). The iterative process resists tidy linearity, as teacher researchers adopt a “sociocultural and situated view” of their messy classroom realities as rich sources for their own learning (Dodman et al., 2017, p. 32). Storm (2016) celebrates inquiry for this very reason, noting its ability to “unsettle” deprofessionalizing myths of the teacher “as one who transmits knowledge instead of produces knowledge; as one who works alone instead of in collaboration; as
one who is apolitical instead of working toward a more just society” (p. 74). Therefore, I am by no means the first to suggest inquiry is, in essence, counter-narrative (Hulburt & Knotts, 2012; Klehr, 2009; Ravitch, 2014; Wolk, 2008). Some scholars note how teacher research proudly stands apart from traditional education research, offering a more robust account of life in schools by virtue of including teachers’ voices (Joseph & Burnaford, 2001; Klehr, 2012). Indeed, narrative—and other aesthetic practices—can assist teacher researchers in solving their problems of practice, but teachers’ stories—and storied identities—ideally have power beyond the classroom walls (Downey, 2015; Klehr, 2009; Taylor, 2017). Because inquiry exposes “the interconnectedness between knowledge, authority, and power,” Wamba (2011) suggests action research is, itself, a form of critical pedagogy (p. 168), capable of generating “valid and vital knowledge” to challenge the status quo (p. 174).

Scholars have thus advocated for inquiry-oriented action research to empower teachers to join critical policy conversations (Meyers & Rust, 2003; Rust & Meyers, 2007; Sinnema et al., 2017), recognizing the authentic contributions practitioners can make and suggesting such outcomes are well worth the risk. Still, it is difficult to say to what extent this is happening on a grand scale. Klehr (2009), for example, calls for more “systematic studies on the personal, professional, and political development aspects of teacher research,” as well as investigations of “the conditions under which the research is organized and supported” (p. 43). My dissertation addresses this void, given my research questions: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? Rust and Meyers (2007) suggest teachers might interlace their
“stories from the field” to “spur changes in personal, professional knowledge and in political awareness and acumen” and ultimately “affect decision-making at local, state and national levels” (p. 70). By taking on that task, albeit in collaboration with my participants, I am mindful of the delicate balance associated with the dissemination of teacher knowledge (Klehr, 2009; Raelin, 2007). Wishing neither to deprive my participants of agency nor “overhyped teacher research as a cure-all” (Klehr, 2009, p. 68), I view this study as an overarching counter-narrative comprised of their equally powerful counter-stories, taking great care to explain my intentional study design in Chapter 3.

In some respects, thinking of teacher research as counter-narrative honors Dewey’s progressive vision of the ideal teacher. Educators who engage in narrative-rich reflective practice combine both art and science to improve their craft, inherently challenging top-down, simplistic, and technical modes of teaching and teacher education (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Garte, 2017; Kim, 2013; Rubin & Land, 2017). Resisting “narrow and unlovely” goals as anti-democratic, Dewey (1900/1990) declared, “the outlook needs to be enlarged” (p. 7). This study, by taking a long view of multiple teacher researchers, answers that call, illustrating how inquiry as stance endures because it is far more than a best practice or ready-made technique. Enabling teachers to “see themselves as leaders […] and as makers of knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 135), a lifelong inquiry stance reclaims accountability by eschewing rigor in favor of ontological, epistemological vigor.

**Chapter Summary**

This dissertation explores and documents the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age
of Accountability affecting American public schools. This chapter positioned that purpose with an overview of relevant literature. I began with a brief history of the emergence and development of the inquiry stance construct, situated within the larger body of scholarship on teacher research and teacher researchers. I then identified the assumptions guiding my study, surveying pertinent theories of identity as sociocultural, narrative, and agentic. The chapter concluded with a discussion of counter-storytelling, illustrating how teacher researchers imbued with an inquiry stance continue that powerful tradition. Indeed, within the larger history of teacher research, the transition from rigor to vigor, aided by the emergence of inquiry as stance, invites us to replace concretized myths and master narratives with vibrant, nuanced stories of successful teacher researchers. The next chapter, which introduces three such inquirers, elaborates on the research design briefly described in Chapter 1.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodological decisions comprising the study design for this dissertation, which aims to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools. Framed primarily as an oral history, this study draws on interview data to examine the internal dispositions and external forces that have both fostered and frustrated participants’ experiences with teacher research over the course of their careers. The following sections describe my decision to conduct this investigation within a qualitative paradigm, the epistemological perspective guiding that approach, and the rationale behind the techniques I used for participant selection, data collection, and analysis. In addition, this chapter explores how the research design accounts for trustworthiness.

Research Design

As explained in Chapter 2, teacher researchers reflect on their teaching, problematize their practice, and ideally share the outcome of that process beyond their classroom walls, guided by an inquiry stance that informs their identity as well as their actions. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) formally theorized inquiry as stance to convey both firmness and flexibility, as

Teacher research both generates and is generated by individual and collective questions about practices and theories that evolve over time. The activities of teacher-researchers, therefore, change qualitatively over time even though inquiry structures remain the same. (p. 307, emphasis mine)

A qualitative approach attuned to local histories of teacher research and their macrosocial contexts is thus appropriate for this study of long-term teacher researchers.
Qualitative Research

Derived from perceived problems, qualitative studies have an overarching goal of understanding (Crotty, 1998). Scholars have questioned the endurance of teacher research in the Accountability Era, which would seem to be a hostile climate for inquiry (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001; Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015). This study qualifies and explains that paradox, while simultaneously answering calls to address the “human side of being a practitioner” (Campbell & McNamara, 2007, p. 111). Indeed, qualitative research is openly intersubjective (Grumet, 1990), and this study specifically follows the lead of other qualitative researchers who have gleaned insights from experienced and retired educators (Hobson, 2001). As active contributors to my study, my participants facilitated my understanding by sharing with me their own understandings of inquiry as stance.

Recognizing a need for more scholarship on the qualities and catalysts of teacher researchers, Hahs-Vaughn and Yanowitz (2009) responded with a large-scale, quantitative study, noting, “few researchers have gone beyond local case studies to gain a broader picture of the characteristics of the teachers who engage in research” (p. 417). Nevertheless, the logistic regression they provide does little to honor the complexity of teacher research and the practitioners who engage in it. In contrast, qualitative methodology enabled me to view my participants’ lives as complex data (Robert & Shenhav, 2014). Moreover, given qualitative research’s close association with storytelling (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006), this approach, informed by the narrative principles mentioned in Chapter 2 and further described below, allowed me to “story stance,” articulating how and why the inquiry stance endures.
Narrative Research

Narrative inquiry is popular among researchers who resist reductionist, positivist methodology (Blumenreich, 2004; Carr, 2003; Grumet, 1990). As described in Chapter 2, practitioner inquiry has a similar history of opposition to traditional, hegemonic philosophies. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who believe researchers are storied, trace narrative inquiry—much like practitioner inquiry—to the work of John Dewey. Mindful of the continuity of experience, not only within individuals, but also from generation to generation, Dewey (1900/1990) maintained, “To study history is not to amass information, but to use information in constructing a vivid picture of how and why men did thus and so; achieved their successes and came to their failures” (p. 151). A narrative exploration of long-term teacher research facilitates this aim, capturing the persistent power of inquiry as stance so that it might continue to proliferate, even in seemingly hostile sociopolitical climates.

Given how the inquiry stance is paradoxically firm and flexible, as explained in Chapter 2, a narrative approach, treating “existence as situated action” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5), captures the ontological and epistemological aspects of inquiry. Inherently attuned to chronology, conflict, and societal forces, narrative is especially well suited for nuanced explorations of process (Bazeley, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005), resulting in rich, qualitative, textual data. Indeed, narrative analysis of interview transcripts can surface the “deep structures of human existence” (Robert & Shenhav, 2014, p. 5), as well as the “cultural discourses, institutions, organizations, and interactions that produce social inequalities” (Chase, 2011, p. 430). My participants’ stories are powerful accounts of the endurance of teacher research and the inquiry stance in the Age of Accountability, poised to contribute to the larger story of practitioner
inquiry and how it has been able to and will continue to evolve, especially owing to the oral history framework described below.

**Oral History**

Though sharing memories may feel like a casual, everyday practice, in a scholarly sense, oral history is “a specialized way of talking about the past: a self-consciously historical conversation between an interviewer and interviewee” (Starecheski, 2014, p. 187). Joseph and Burnaford (2001) suggest qualitative research is naturally historical, and other scholars view oral history as inherently aligned with qualitative research (Gardner, 2003; Kenyon, 2016; Shopes, 2011; Wilson, 2007). Known for “social power with political potential” (Starecheski, 2014, p. 216), oral history, through collaborative interviews, recognizes “both interviewer and narrator […] as having knowledge of the situation as well as deficits in understanding” (Yow, 2005, pp. 1-2). I approached my participants with a measure of humility: having long practiced teacher research, they are experts—true scholars of their teaching. Nevertheless, I did extensive legwork to contextualize their stories, situating them within the larger sociohistorical narratives of the Age of Accountability and connecting them to one another thematically. As an oral history, this study is a result of collaboration with my participants, yet I am responsible for both the initial design and the final product.

Putting my plan into action required the use of deliberate procedures and keen attention to detail. Shopes (2011) specifies six key descriptors for the work of oral historians: 1) a story prompted by the listener, 2) both process and product in that it must be recorded, 3) a search guided by a desire for historical insight, 4) an interpretive exercise rather than a wholly factual account, 5) an in-depth inquiry, and 6) an emphatically oral craft. I embraced these multifaceted demands and the empathy
required to meet them (Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2016), attracted to oral history’s democratic, egalitarian aims (Shopes, 2011; Slim & Thompson, 1995; Sloan, 2012; Yow, 2005). Indeed, oral historians often seek “to repair the historical record by including the voices of participants outside the mainstream of society” (Janesick, 2007, pp. 112). As explained in Chapter 2, this study positions teacher research as a counter-story and likewise responds to master narratives about America’s teachers.

Therefore, oral history aligns with the qualitative, narrative design I selected as the best way to explore my research questions: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? According to Noffke (1995), teacher research presupposes that “identities and the experiences that help to construct them affect visions of what ought to be” (p. 7). Though oral history certainly looks rearward, as participants rely on narratives to make sense of their pasts, justifying former decisions and reflecting on lessons learned (Yow, 2005), my study also illustrates my and my participants’ forward thinking, resulting in implications for teachers, teacher educators, and even administrators and policymakers, above and beyond the historical value of their accounts. It is no small thing that these insights come from the minds of public K-12 educators, for oral history, by “involving people outside the academy and established archives as producers and interpreters of their own history” (Shopes, 2011, p. 455), honors the epistemological roots of practitioner inquiry.

**Epistemology**

As a qualitative researcher, I feel compelled to explicitly address my own epistemology, briefly mentioned in the previous chapters. Operating from a constructionist-constructivist paradigm, I hold that truth depends on human cognition,
which, in turn, derives from social interaction; knowledge, in other words, is socially constructed (Bazeley, 2013; Crotty, 1998). This means an inquiry stance does not exist apart from our perceptions and understandings of it; rather, inquiry is “embedded in life and life embedded in constant change in relation to social, cultural, and political contexts” (Phillion et al., 2005, p. 1). Hoping to untangle this intricate web, I set out to study the enduring inquiry stance through the people who embody it: long-term teacher researchers. Indeed, they were “involved, in the fullest sense, in the narration of their experience and the analysis of their situation” (Slim & Thompson, 1995, p. 8), even as I took on the larger analytical task of looking across their stories, in concert with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This broader perspective enabled me to consider my participants’ stories in relation to “the flow of power in the wider world” (Riessman, 2008, p. 8), taking a critical look at my data.

Constructivist studies undergirded by a social justice perspective “give added weight to the perspectives of those with less power and privilege” (Patton, 2002, p. 98), embodying the counter-narrative style described in Chapter 2. This study thus gives voice to veteran teachers who have weathered decades of education reforms wrought by policymakers and administrators while maintaining an inquiry stance. My role, however, is not to empower these individuals, but rather to document their self-empowerment. By acknowledging my own support for American public schools and showcasing examples of exemplary educators therein, I am striving “to ‘join with,’ rather than ‘know and save’” (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011, p. 82). Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) envision a culture in which teachers “have more voice and more respect,” due to their unique access and insights (p. 165). My study honors and affirms
living examples of this ideal, articulating how they persevere as teacher researchers so that others might follow their lead.

Like Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), I, too, “do not presume to speak for teachers” (p. 45). Rather, acknowledging “a general lack of information about classroom life from a truly emic perspective” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 300), I seek, like other scholars, to honor teachers’ unique voices (Gibbons, 2016; Goodson, 1992; Joseph & Burnaford, 2001; Meyers & Rust, 2003; Pine, 2009), and in so doing to engage the “radically contradistinctive view of both research and teaching” represented by the confounding endurance of the inquiry stance (Schaenen et al., 2012, p. 69). By fusing historical inquiry and social science, I have taken an intentionally interdisciplinary approach, yielding insights about the past, present, and future of my topic (Slim & Thompson, 1995), while at the same time avoiding “patronizing sentimentality,” which “consigns the teacher’s tale to myth, resonant but marginal because it is not part of the discourse that justifies real action” (Grumet, 1990, para. 17). Indeed, my purpose to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools, presupposes my desire for teacher research to continue to flourish. Given my constructionist epistemology, my participants are key to that aim.

**Participant Selection**

Seeking to understand how public K-12 teachers can maintain an inquiry stance in the Age of Accountability necessitated intentional selection of participants, achieved through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Given my research questions and the nature of interview data, I sought a manageable number of participants who have engaged in teacher research since approximately 2000, thus able to account for
noticeable shifts in circumstance through the *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* eras. Moreover, intensity sampling (Patton, 2002) ensured my participants embodied an inquiry stance, mirroring prior studies of distinguished educators (Bray et al., 2000; Dagenais et al., 2000; van der Heijden et al., 2015). Although Cuban (2009) cautions against “tantalizing but atypical glimpses” of American classrooms (p. 4), my participants, by design, are exceptional individuals. Not all teachers engage in teacher research. Not all teacher researchers embody an inquiry stance. My task was to recruit 2-3 outstanding educators with an inquiry stance—intense examples of the core construct under study, purposefully selected for their insights.

I began recruitment by soliciting nominations from scholars who have long explored the inquiry terrain (e.g. Megan Blumenreich, Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Nancy Dana, Ryan Flessner, Mary Klehr, Susan Lytle, Frances Rust, Ken Zeichner), using the recruitment script in Appendix A. It is unlikely practitioners come to inquiry on their own (Flessner & Klehr, 2016), whereas these and other teacher educators have introduced generations to the value of teacher research. Moreover, Yow (2005) cites personal recommendation as one of the best ways to recruit oral history participants. Only some of my e-mails yielded responses, even after follow-up attempts. One scholar confessed to a lack of teacher research in the area, though, tellingly, the individual forwarded my e-mail to another scholar on my list. Compiling the suggestions from Megan Blumenreich, Nancy Dana, and Mary Klehr, I had 5 viable participants.

Though soliciting nominations was a crucial step, I ultimately had to ensure my participants themselves identified as having an inquiry stance, since “first-person self-told identities are likely to have the most immediate impact on our actions” (Sfard &
Prusak, 2005, p. 17). For help, I turned to prior studies that solicited nominations of teachers before asking the teachers themselves if they understood why they had been nominated (e.g. van der Heijden et al., 2015). Snow-Gerono’s (2003) study of the onset of inquiry as stance was particularly useful, as she filtered her participant pool “to gather and understand participants’ ideas about living an inquiry stance” (p. 8). I kept these models in mind as I sought willing interviewees who a) have practiced teacher research since approximately 2000, b) have engaged in multiple cycles of inquiry, c) believe themselves to hold an inquiry stance toward their teaching, and d) have retired from or currently work in a public K-12 school.

The first criterion ensured I was working with seasoned teacher researchers who have taught and inquired within the Age of Accountability, in accordance with the background of my study as described in Chapter 1. The second criterion more explicitly defined what it means to be a long-term teacher researcher. Moreover, apt participants had to know what it means to engage in an inquiry cycle and be familiar with the notion of inquiry as stance, hence the third criterion. Finally, I limited my search to public school educators in light of my research purpose: to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools.

My study builds on the work of scholars who have sought late-stage teachers as participants. Huberman’s (1993) groundbreaking exploration of educators’ career trajectories suggested practitioners enter a disengagement phase as they near retirement. Long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance stand as exceptions to this trend. As such, their number is small but mighty. Huberman’s (1993) study involved
an impressive 160 participants, strengthening his findings yet offering a regrettable lack of detail. A much smaller sample size of 3 long-term teacher researchers was ideal for my study, generating a robust amount of data to deepen my understanding of the enduring inquiry stance while enabling me to remain faithful to participants' unique perspectives (Bazeley, 2013; Patton; 2002). Indeed, Muchmore (2002) sees value in even a single account of a teacher’s life.

After connecting with nominees, I needed to ensure they were willing and able to participate. Efron (2005) suggests practitioners can benefit from discussing their inquiry stance, a point I conveyed in my recruitment materials (Appendix A). Further, although some oral historians have encountered reticent participants (Layman, 2009), because my participants do, indeed, hold an inquiry stance, they have ample experience reflecting on their practice, translating to a comfort with and eagerness for sharing their insights. Indeed, the reflection required for someone to engage in storytelling as sense-making means it is a task ready-made for reflective practitioners (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Yow, 2005). Nevertheless, I engaged in a brief phone call with 3 of the recommended participants, using a screening form (Appendix B) to assess their basic understanding of inquiry, get a sense of their storytelling ability, and record any noteworthy details about the schools in which they work/have worked. This exchange also indicated individuals’ availability and responsiveness to communication from me, as well as our potential for building rapport. All 3 of the teacher researchers proved willing, able, and eager, whereas the 2 remaining nominees indicated through e-mail that they did not believe they fit the criteria.
The brief initial conversation with participants enabled me to answer any questions regarding the informed consent form I asked them to sign, which was approved by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board as Study ID IRB201703204. In particular, participants contemplated whether they wished to remain anonymous. Oral historians sometimes wrestle with the fine line between conveying rich detail, to provide readers a contextual toehold, and protecting anonymity (Kenyon, 2016; Mockler, 2007). Consequently, sometimes they intentionally name their participants, but never without informed consent (Yow, 2005). Because my study employs purposeful intensity sampling, there is a clear rationale for identifying and celebrating my participants as paragon practitioners, and Patton (2002) notes how “confidentiality norms” are negotiable, especially when working with participants who like the idea of “owning their own stories” (p. 411). Of course, that decision was up to my participants, and I prepared for the possibility of their changing their minds over the course of the study, as well as for a mix of masked and unmasked participants. The narrative portraits in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 rely heavily on my participants’ own words, serving as extensive introductions of them as unique individuals. Here, I offer very brief descriptions, humbled and honored to be able to identify them by name.

I first connected with Cindy Ballenger of Massachusetts, whose presence on the back cover of Inquiry as Stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) arguably attests to her suitability for my study. The author of Teaching Other People’s Children: Literacy and Learning in a Bilingual Classroom (1999) and Puzzling Moments, Teachable Moments: Practicing Teacher Research in Urban Classrooms (2009), Cindy has a wealth of teacher research experience. In fact, she earned a doctorate in applied
psycholinguistics from Boston University by writing a teacher research dissertation: *Language and Literacy in a Haitian Pre-School: A Perspective from Teacher-Research* (1994). She is technically a retired educator, having worked with students in pre-K through the middle grades since the early ’80s, yet she continues to serve as a public school literacy specialist and as a teacher educator.

Likewise, Gail Ritchie of Virginia is an experienced teacher educator who continues to work in public schools, despite having retired from a long and lively career in early childhood education that began in the early ’90s. Gail learned about teacher research as a pre-service teacher at George Mason University, where she ultimately earned a Ph.D. The title of her dissertation, *Teacher Research as a Habit of Mind* (2006), underscores her suitability for my study, as does a reflective piece she wrote for the *Virginia Journal of Education* (2014). Then twenty-five years into her career, Gail mused, “through changes in leadership, schools, initiatives and organizational structure, my core belief in inquiry-based, reflective practice has remained the foundation for my work” because “teacher research is not an add-on or extra chore; it is a way of being!” (para. 1, 5). I could not agree more.

Finally, Erik Shager of Wisconsin is proud to have served in an alternative high school setting since he started teaching in the mid-’90s. Having learned about action research through the Madison Metropolitan School District, Erik went on to earn a masters degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison after producing a teacher research thesis. One of his most extensive projects, “Been There, Done That: Student Inquiry about High School Dropouts” (2007) appears in *Creating Equitable Classrooms through Action Research* and attests to Erik’s fondness for engaging in collaborative
and parallel inquiry with his students. At the time of this writing, both Erik’s teaching career and his inquiry stance are going strong.

Needless to say, after receiving the consent of these 3 suitable, amenable, and exceptional individuals, I was eager to begin collecting data.

Data Collection

For both oral historians and social scientists, interviewing is a means of gathering stories (Bazeley, 2013; Patton, 2002; Yow, 2005) and was thus an especially appropriate method of data collection for this study. Owing to their geographical distance from me, as well as a lack of travel funds, I conducted the interviews over the phone and audio-recorded each conversation. I kept a notepad nearby (Yow, 2005), where I jotted just enough to guide my listening or capture specific names and other details for later review.

Although I was guided by the oral history principles described above, I chose to adapt Seidman’s (2006) in-depth model of three, open-ended interviews, expressly designed to tap into “the issues, structures, processes, and policies that imbue participants’ stories” (p. 130). Lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, each interview had a distinct approach, enabling me to focus my conversations with participants as I collected information related to 1) their professional background, 2) their knowledge of and experience with living an inquiry stance, and 3) their feelings, opinions, and values in connection with my research questions regarding the internal dispositions and institutional features that foster and frustrate teacher inquiry. Though this phase of the project was officially for data collection, soliciting information of this sort inevitably meant analysis was already underway (Patton, 2002).
An overlap of collection and analysis was even more likely given my choice to conduct three interviews with each participant: both narrator and listener could reflect on and analyze—and, in my case, transcribe—prior conversations in between interviews. It was important for me to keep analytical memos after each call (Yow, 2005), heeding Larson’s (2013) advice that oral history interviews should ultimately be tailored to individuals, while also attending to reflexivity (Chakraborty, 2017; Grumet, 1990) by documenting my emotional reactions to each conversation. Keeping my research purpose in focus provided structure to each three-interview set, as I endeavored to collect evidence of each participant’s inquiry stance, gather anecdotes illustrating that stance at work, and obtain a sense of how the teachers progressed from one inquiry cycle to the next, noting what inspired as well as impeded them. Collectively, these conversations served my overarching goal to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools.

In Seidman’s (2006) model, the initial conversation elicits a participant’s focused life history. Thus, using a predetermined protocol (Appendix C), I prompted participants to recount their journeys to the classroom, and more specifically, to teacher research. Yow (2005) urges oral historians to find a balance between “random conversations” and mindful flexibility (p. 68), so I relied on a semi-structured approach for the entire study (Chenail, 2011; Slim & Thompson, 1995). Each interview had a pair of guiding questions apart from a longer list of interview questions. I sent the broader questions to participants ahead of time to give them a sense of the nature of each conversation while avoiding the canned or overly rehearsed answers that might result from disclosing the
full protocol. Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi’s (1992) interview questions, grounded in a sociohistorical understanding of knowledge and grouped in terms of “substance” and “formation” to elicit “crucial life episodes” (pp. 61-62), were useful as I composed my interview protocol.

My objective during the initial interview was to establish or maintain rapport, while simultaneously learning the sort of information that enabled me to compose narratives based on participants’ experiences as long-term teacher researchers. Although I focused most intently on the aspects of their life histories that directly related to the topic of my dissertation— inquiry as stance, Yow (2005) contends time spent on life histories is never in vain and recommends starting with a broad question and tailoring subsequent questions in light of the narrator’s response. Hence, I included questions about my participants’ experiences as K-12 students, believing those formative years inevitably influenced their decisions to become teachers and their receptiveness to teacher research. As the conversations proceeded, I steered my participants to discuss their earliest inklings of inquiry stance, ending the first interview with an understanding of what to expect during the next conversation as well as determining when that interview would occur.

Ideally, the span between conversations with participants is sufficient enough to provide time for intentional reflection and tentative analysis—and to provide a necessary break for both interviewer and interviewee, but not so long as to impede the ability to pick up where the prior session left off (Patton, 2002; Slim & Thompson, 1995). For each of my participants, the time between the initial phone call and the first interview, as well as between the first and second interview, was approximately 1-2 weeks. These
spans were critical for keeping track of individual narratives and to begin to see connections among them. Naturally, I also spent the time sending e-mails, thanking participants for one conversation and reminding them of the time and date arranged for the next, as well as sending the guiding questions for the next interview.

The second interview focused less on a chronological arc or journey and more on the immediate details of experience (Seidman, 2006). I sought vivid descriptions of participants’ experiences with teacher research and pertinent illustrations of their inquiry stance at work. As in the first interview, I used a pre-determined protocol, asking spontaneous probing, follow-up, or clarifying questions based on my narrators’ responses (Yow, 2005). In relation to my overarching research questions, this round of conversations provided me with my participants’ self-generated narratives, enabling me to story stance based, in part, on their own rich anecdotes about teacher research. Chase (2011) notes that for narrative researchers, the interviewer-interviewee relationship is more appropriately termed narrator-listener, and this was especially true for the second of my three interviews.

As at the close of my first interview, I concluded the second conversation by preparing participants for the next steps, namely describing the purpose of the final interview and suggesting when it might occur. However, wanting to incorporate periodic member-checks within my multiple, semi-structured interview design (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Fobear, 2016), I intentionally expanded the length of time between the second and third interviews to finish transcribing the first two rounds, adding questions and comments to elicit clarification or confirmation. An example appears in Figure 3-1.
When I reached out to participants to reiterate my gratitude for the second round of interviews and to confirm a date and time for the third, I was able to send the first 2 transcripts along with the final set of guiding questions. These methods attest to my care and concern for my narrators (Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2016; Sloan, 2012; Yow, 2005), and “the skill and the sympathy, the proficiency and the patience” crucial to oral history’s success (Gardner, 2003, p. 176).

The goal of the final interview was for participants to reflect on their experiences and share the meaning they derived (Seidman, 2006). Though the meaning-making process might have occurred in the prior interviews, “through the shaping or ordering of experience” (Chase, 2011, p. 421), this third interview was an opportunity to converse with participants about their own stories and the various settings in which they occurred. I facilitated this by once again drawing on a predetermined protocol, formulating additional questions as needed based on the first two interviews. For instance, I asked for clarification or elaboration about some of the previously shared stories, and I was
also able to confirm some of the initial analysis generated by journaling between interviews and annotating the first 2 transcripts. Providing participants with both time and transcripts meant they could exhibit more extensive agency in the third interview, noting their own omissions or intentionally returning to particular stories.

Because qualitative data collection and analysis often occur in tandem (Merriam, 2009), my interview questions guided participants to “identify social events or institutional conditions” that helped or hindered their inquiry stance (Huberman, 1993, p. 22). In other words, the overall purpose of the third interview closely approximated the purpose of my study: to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools.

As with prior conversations, this third and final interview affirmed my narrators’ insights and expertise, so I ended the exchange by conveying my gratitude, indicating I would follow up with transcripts during the formal member-checking phase of my study (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Fobear, 2016). I also sent each interviewee a subsequent thank-you e-mail. As before, I supplied each participant with an annotated transcript, recognizing there would be no follow-up interview. Each of them graciously responded with additional information and insight, as illustrated in Figure 3-2, which further demonstrates how one participant took it upon herself to convert the transcript to a Google doc so as to respond more easily to my queries and comments, as well as to add occasional annotations of her own.
Figure 3-2. Participant response to annotated transcript.

**Data Analysis**

Once I conducted 3 interviews with each of my 3 participants, I formally began data analysis, wherein “the task is to do one’s best to make sense of things,” despite a lack of formulas or rules (Patton, 2002, p. 570). Cohen (2013) notes how even with a lone participant, oral history is “deceptively simple,” demanding “tremendous effort, aptitude, and skill” (pp. 155, 161). For me, given 3 participants and 3 conversations with each, the challenge was formidable.

Transcribing alone was a time-consuming task, but I appreciated being able to better familiarize myself with my participants’ words, emotions, perceptions, worldviews, and experiences (Patton, 2002; Yow, 2005). Moreover, as principal investigator, I was motivated to stay as faithful as possible to their testimonies (Slim & Thompson, 1995).
Though I began transcription as soon as each interview concluded, my process became more intentional and systematic once all the interviews were complete.

**Portraits**

I began formal analysis by shaping transcript data into meaningful and accessible narrative portraits (Anderson, 2011; Grant & Murray, 1999). Portraiture is especially compelling in educational research, as its focus on examples of goodness can “avoid deficit tropes” (Brooks, 2017, p. 2240). Given my desire to feature exceptional teacher researchers, portraiture was appropriate for my study. To sketch out a core narrative for each narrator, I read each participant’s set of transcripts straight through, oscillating between the interviews and the memos I generated in response to them (Friedman, 2014). In this manner, I distilled my abundant raw data into manageable narrative chunks that are logical, meaningful, and interesting (Zeller, 1995), rearranging some of the anecdotes that arose organically—rather than chronologically—during our conversations (Slim & Thompson, 1995), and inserting “intermediary story-like information” to guide my readers (Chakraborty, 2017, p. 2967). These core narratives, which appear in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, draw heavily upon the first two interviews for each participant, in which they shared their own stories of acquiring and experiencing the inquiry stance. My job was to translate these tales from first-person to third-

To accomplish this, narrative researchers often consider how people tell their stories (Chase, 2011). As I organized and storied my transcript data, I considered what kind of character my participants envisioned themselves to be and articulated the roles they see themselves playing. My participants entertained these questions in the third interview, while I formally explored them during data analysis: Who are the antagonists in their stories? What are the pertinent plot points? What is the setting? The mood? Are
these comedies or tragedies? Oral historians are encouraged to look for storytelling devices like chronology and causality, as well as underlying cultural patterns (Shopes, 2011; Yow, 2005). Likewise, narrative researchers in the social sciences are advised to engage in inductive analysis, asking what each narrative reveals “about the person and world from which it came,” looking specifically for “social patterns” (Patton, 2002, pp. 133, 478).

This approach nicely dovetails with my research questions: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? I constructed each participant’s narrative, then, with my research focus in mind. Moving from one participant to the next, I began to see distinct patterns emerging, particularly because I rendered the narratives in such a way that they are easy to compare (e.g. of roughly equivalent length). This combats the atomizing effect of portraiture (Freund, 2015) without disrupting the authenticity of “the raw recounting of experience” (Slim & Thompson, 1995, p. 1). Each unique participant has a unique chapter: 4, 5, or 6. Collectively, these narratives reduced my data set to a more manageable size. Upon completion of the stories, I once again engaged in member-checking (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Fobear, 2016), receiving permission from participants to proceed. Then, using the coding and interpretation process described below, I looked across the narratives to generate the analysis that appears in Chapters 7 and 8.

Coding

With core narratives for each participant in place, I moved to the coding phase of analysis. Narrative approaches sometimes omit coding in favor of cross-case analysis, wherein the researcher is able “to build a common narrative” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 289).
Because I intentionally selected exceptional participants (Patton, 2002), it was important to honor each individual narrator. Thus, I coded each participant’s unique story, seeking discrete evidence in response to my research questions by noting participants’ dispositions—whether self-identified or observed by me—and references to sociopolitical and/or institutional obstacles and affordances. I used NVivo software to organize my codes. Figure 3-3 is a representative example of this process.

As I moved from narrator to narrator, I looked for shared or similar experiences (Yow, 2005), particularly in terms of their descriptions of the sociopolitical and institutional contexts serving as the backdrop for their inquiry stance, as well as coded character traits common to all three inquirers. This process supplied me with ample evidence from multiple participants to support my analytical goal: to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools.
Interpretation

After several passes through my data, some of which yielded emerging themes that sent me back in search of the literature surveyed in Chapter 2, I was in a strong position to articulate a set of insights, balancing description and interpretation (Patton, 2002). In fact, Slim and Thompson (1995) prefer the term “insights” to “data,” contending oral history “produces ‘opinionated’ material in the best sense of the word,” provided it is “recognized as such” (p. 143). In this phase of analysis, I brought my own perspective to bear on my participants’ understandings of their experiences with inquiry as stance, resulting in an intersubjective interpretation (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008; Shopes, 2011). Gardner (2003) sees each oral history participant as “a self that is fashioned from without—from history—as well as from within—from consciousness” (p. 179). An oral historian identifies and connects these two character arcs, being as faithful as possible to the participant’s truth (Yow, 2005). From my vantage as the researcher, I adhered to this maxim to link my participants within the larger narrative of my study (Goodson, 1992), in accordance with my goal to situate their unique stories of the powerfully perplexing endurance of inquiry as stance in the Age of Accountability.

To that end, the zoom model of analysis proved useful. Similar to how Sfard and Prusak (2005) associate the act of identifying with taking a snapshot of life in process, Pamphilon (1999) treats life histories as metaphorical photographs, inviting researchers to acknowledge each “individual account within its own panorama” (p. 393). The levels of meaning attained by zooming are dynamic, interrelated parts of a whole—the living foreground and background of the same picture. At the macro-zoom level, the researcher adopts a collective, sociocultural perspective to “reveal the variable impact of historical events on the lives of individuals,” while the meso-zoom level concentrates
on each “individual’s process of storying” (p. 396). The micro-zoom adjusts the researcher’s gaze to the products of that storying and the “affective complexity of life histories” (p. 396). Finally, the interactional-zoom level “overtly recognizes the researcher/photographer’s active involvement in the generation and selection of data” (p. 395). Thus, like Pamphilon, I acknowledge my authority and subjective interpretation of my data, while at the same time recognizing how my participants, by authoring their stories in conversations with me, also played a vital interpretive role.

Applying this model to my study, the interactional-zoom level is most salient in this chapter, where I justify my choices as a researcher and recognize my subjectivity. Chapters 4, 5, and 6, as individual narrative portraits heavily comprised of my participants’ words, provide the raw material for the micro- and macro-zoom levels, while also illustrating each narrator’s storytelling capacity, i.e. the meso level. Chapter 7, which focuses on the distinguishing traits of long-term teacher researchers, articulates insights based on the micro level, while also attending to the meso level, since long-term teacher researchers’ storytelling can illustrate their personality traits. Finally, Chapter 8, which illuminates my participants’ social and institutional contexts, addresses the macro level “to reveal a wider network of social relations” (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 397). Throughout Chapters 7 and 8, however, I remain mindful of the ongoing influence of the interactional level by openly empathizing with my participants and explicitly advocating for teacher research. Thus, Pamphilon’s multi-leveled approach clearly aligns with the theoretical framework described in Chapter 2 by recognizing how identity is a socioculturally situated process and product (Peacock & Holland, 1993; Sfard & Prusak, 2005).
The dissertation as a whole also follows Pamphilon’s advice to take a multidisciplinary approach. Indeed, both historians and social scientists—particularly those who employ narrative methods—recommend multiple levels of analysis (Butt et al., 1992; Grumet, 1990; Maynes et al., 2008; McDonald et al., 2016). Data analysis was by no means an attempt to discover historical truths, but an effort to access the meaning my participants gleaned from their experiences as part of the living history of education, coupled with my ability to make broader sense of that unique sense-making. In keeping with the principles of oral history presented earlier in this chapter, the outcome of this analysis phase was nuanced and well-supported historical insights (Shopes, 2011), rather than indisputable facts. These insights are featured and discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

**Trustworthiness**

By definition, qualitative studies are not generalizable. Delving deeply into the qualities and nuances of a social construct prevents the discovery of objective, universal truths. Patton (2002), however, distinguishes between truth and honesty, and the latter descriptor ably applies to my work. Following the advice of narrative scholars, I was transparent about my process of participant selection, as well as my active role in the data collection and analysis phases (Chakraborty, 2017; Pamphilon, 1999; Stewart, 2010). Furthermore, Slim and Thompson (1995) contend the “co-generated” nature of oral history does not detract from its validity; rather, the very word *interview* connotes “a particular perspective worked out or created between two parties” (pp. 148-149). The constructionist-constructivist paradigm I acknowledged earlier in this chapter thus captures how interaction with my participants yielded valuable insights on the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers in the Age of Accountability. For those
insights to be of use to my readers, I must systematically earn their trust, much as I had to take specific steps to foster the trust of my narrators (Yow, 2005). The sections below—on credibility, transferability, and subjectivity—examine the measures I took to create dependable and authentic accounts of my participants’ experiences in order to ensure my research is trustworthy.

**Credibility**

No more neutral than any other investigative approach, oral history and narrative inquiry demand recognition of participants’ agency (Chakraborty, 2017; Fobear, 2016; Measor & Sikes, 1992). As Shopes (2011) explains, oral history “does not seek to change the narrator; it proceeds from the assumption that the narrator has been an active agent” (p. 452). With older narrators in particular, stories can be “overwhelmingly positive,” reflecting the tellers’ sense of the narrative whole (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 394). On the other hand, Blumenreich (2004) cautions that the agentic individuals who star in these narratives can inadvertently reproduce hegemonic discourses. Gardner (2003) likewise acknowledges narrators’ shortcomings, in that they “inevitably leave large tracts of the landscape of memory virtually unexplored” (p. 177). Though even the most skilled oral historian should not expect faultless participants and unlimited access to their pasts, Yow (2005) maintains oral history participants can be surprisingly candid and capable. My experience bears this out.

Confirming their accounts by way of periodic member-checks protected my participants while contributing to the credibility of my work (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Chase, 2011). Striving to maintain fidelity to each tale and its teller, I ran tentative analysis by my participants during the data collection phase, in accordance with prescribed quality control methods (Patton, 2002; Yow, 2005), and I also sent them
copies of their transcripts and the core narratives I composed, giving them editorial license where appropriate. This ensured the stories were “endorsable” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 16), or faithful to the narrator’s perspective. Attesting to the care with which I wrote as well as the rapport we had established, the requested changes were minimal.

Thoroughly introducing my participants by way of narrative portraits (Anderson, 2011; Brooks, 2017; Grant & Murray, 1999), Chapters 4, 5, and 6 enable readers to believe in their existence as well as their insights. I explained my storytelling process in the analysis section above, and Figure 3-1 illustrates how I honed in on specific segments of my participants’ speech, marking them in bold font as viable pieces of those narratives. I have openly supplied this information, cognizant of the power differential inherent in representing others’ voices (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Indeed, I recognize how narratives can be seductive, slippery, and even tyrannical at times (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Huberman, 1996; Riessman, 2008), yet I celebrate them as “models of identity and agency” (Bruner, 1996, p. xiv), unmistakably aligned with my research questions and guided by the framework described in Chapter 2. Grounded in that framework, I resist skepticism about the intersubjectivity of interview data (Kirk & Wall, 2010).

Seeking to explore the internal dispositions and external climates that both help and hinder inquiry as stance, my project openly recognizes how teacher researchers, whose identities are in flux, operate within distinct institutional and sociohistorical contexts.

**Transferability**

Attuned to those distinct contexts, transferability works in concert with credibility to contribute to the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Whereas quantitative studies strive for external validity via large sample sizes, qualitative approaches typically opt for depth over breadth (Patton, 2002). Again, this means the insights I generated in concert
with my participants are not dependably generalizable to all teachers, but the way I present my narrators’ stories in support of the analytical claims I make offers strong implications for teachers and the teacher educators who nurture them. Moreover, so that my participants’ stories might be of use beyond the academy, I composed them in accessible prose, informed but not overpowered by my own interpretive voice (Cohen, 2013; Janesick, 2007; Loh, 2013; Shopes, 2015). Acquiring and composing storied evidence inherently takes audience into account, and Sloan (2012) encourages oral historians to render participants’ stories “in a way that is useful—for them, for us, and for future researchers” (p. 299). To that list, I would add future teachers, who can read Chapters 4, 5, and 6 and imagine themselves playing similar roles in the larger narrative of teacher research.

**Subjectivity**

Stories are useful when their characters come alive, owing to their authors’ keen sense of subjectivity. Subjectivity also contributes to the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Because narrative research, like all qualitative approaches, is necessarily value-laden (Bazeley, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Goodson, 1995), I approached this project attuned to my positionality, recognizing my eagerness to study and support teachers stems from my personal experience. Indeed, as Shopes (2015) explains, “oral historians frequently interview people with whom [they] are in broad sympathy, […] whose experiences and stories have been ignored, marginalized, or misrepresented” (p. 306). Having taught in a public high school, I felt an affinity with my participants, documented in my emotional post-interview memos.

Yow (2005) recognizes the oral historian’s compassionate impulse as entirely appropriate, insisting, “all research is biased” (p. 7), particularly when a researcher’s
assumptions go unexamined. Having openly addressed my theoretical assumptions in Chapter 2 and elaborated on them in this chapter, I do not deny the impact of the researcher on the researched (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). On the contrary, because of the zoom model that guided my analysis, I welcome it (Pamphilon, 1999). In the first conversation with my participants, I endeavored to be transparent about my subjectivity (Chakraborty, 2017) and intentions. Here, I likewise offer a piece of my own story.

As a former high-school English teacher who quit in the middle of Year 7, I readily empathize with the frustrations of K-12 educators, especially in the Age of Accountability. For most of my teaching career, I relished sharing literary works with juniors and seniors, yet I vividly recall my first year, when teaching ninth grade and preparing wayward youth for an inscrutable End-of-Course exam essentially amounted to hazing. In stark contrast to the professional I had envisioned becoming as an eager undergraduate, I spent far too many hours reading scripted test directions, tracking bodily functions on testing anomaly sheets, and pacing interminably up and down the rows of desks filled with zombie-like teenagers drearily filling in bubbles. Per top-down regulations, the rooms were stripped of all stimuli on test days, an all-too-fitting coup de grâce. Though I eventually proved my mettle enough to teach upperclassmen, I could not entirely escape the monotony of administering standardized tests. On the contrary, the stakes increased with the onset of merit-pay schemes and school grades, hallmarks of the neoliberal education policies dominating districts from coast to coast.

As an adolescent, I had been warned that I was “too smart to teach,” but I brushed off others’ objections and proceeded with laser-like focus towards my goal. I maintained students deserved smart teachers, and I tried to live up to my self-imposed
high standards, but the job inevitably wore on me. Long hours and low pay constantly battled my love of content and pedagogy, and I struggled to do what I thought was best for my students within intractable constraints. Had I known about teacher research in those days, I might have been intrigued, but I likely would have seen the inquiry cycle as far too time-consuming. It would have been—it was—my loss.

Like many disaffected teachers, my retreat from the classroom was a journey back to graduate school. Part hideout, part hope for effecting change at a higher level, the experience of being a doctoral student also enabled me to reflect on my past life as a teacher. I have even found my way back to teaching, and fortunately, I discovered practitioner research along the way. My first encounter with the work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) left me aghast at the radical simplicity of practitioner inquiry: believe that teachers—with the right tools—are best positioned to improve their teaching, and they will. Respect them, and they will rise.

I do believe that. I have witnessed the power of reflective practice while teaching and supervising undergraduate and graduate students, and I long to see teacher research spread far and wide. My research, then, has an agenda and is openly “riddled with priorities and values” (Preissle, 2013, p. 527). Despite “tons of studies” on No Child Left Behind, there is a need for “systematic, close, rich insider accounts” of the impact such legislation has had on teacher inquiry (Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015, p. 11). I enthusiastically volunteer for that job, knowing it is not a task I can undertake objectively.

Yow (2005) suggests an investigator’s passion for a subject in no way prevents her from thinking critically about interview data. As I connected with my participants and
elicited their stories, I was admittedly cheering them on. I still am. Even if I harbored less favorable views of them—if, for example, I interviewed authoritarian administrators or market-driven policymakers instead of teachers, my “worldview, personality, and skills” would still shape my study (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). Nevertheless, if “who we are as people defines who we are as researchers” (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 451), then I hope my study design coherently highlights, rather than obfuscates, my priorities and values. Acknowledging my support for public education in a democracy such as ours, and articulating my belief that teachers are professionals deserving of respect, I turned to portraiture, in part, for its association with social justice aims (Brooks, 2017). Unabashed in my efforts to respect and re-professionalize teachers, I profoundly enjoyed the opportunity to work with and for some of America’s very best: three long-term teacher researchers with a powerful inquiry stance.

Chapter Summary

The study design described in this chapter adheres to Patton’s (2002) twelve principles for qualitative research. The purpose of the study, to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers in the Age of Accountability, exemplifies naturalistic inquiry in that it derives from a real-world problem: teacher researchers in American public schools face immense challenges, as described in Chapters 1 and 2. The investigative approach in response to that problem is demonstrably adaptable, though it began with intentional sampling. Rich, qualitative data were collected through open-ended interviews, affirming the value of a researcher’s personal engagement with the researched and striving both for empathy and sensitivity to the dynamic nature of human experience. Finally, the analytical phase of the project recognized participants’ uniqueness, while also synthesizing and
contextualizing their experiences from a holistic perspective, guided not only by my sociohistorical understanding of the construct of inquiry as stance, but also by my own unique voice and perspective. In concert, these principles became “a comprehensive and coherent strategic framework for qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 39), generating powerful insights that appear in subsequent chapters.

Reinforcing this qualitative approach, my study design also abides by the six parameters Shopes (2011) advises for oral history. Rather than “simply someone telling a story” (p. 451), my work instead presents participants’ narratives as prompted by and interpreted through contextual frames. Their unique voices were recorded and thereby affirmed as something worthy of recording, preserved for the teacher researchers of tomorrow, as befitting the historical nature of my project. My study does not presume objectivity; rather, I acknowledge that oral history is “both an act of memory and an inherently subjective account of the past,” albeit “detailed, expansive and reflective” (Shopes, 2011, p. 452). Lastly, my study design’s emphasis on oral history keeps my participants’ unique voices at the center of the project, as evident in my decision to interview them one-on-one, to transcribe these conversations verbatim, and to do so without a transcription service. In concert, these elements enabled me to produce high-quality oral history, comprised of “rich sources with which we may better understand the significance of the past” (Dougherty, 1999, p. 722). In this case, that means the sociohistorical conditions that give rise to inquiry as stance and the distinct kinds of characters acting against that backdrop.

Patton (2002) maintains purpose and audience are especially important for qualitative research. This project aims to chronicle the prior generation for the sake of
the next one, as I believe, like Janesick (2007), that “a sense of history empowers us” (p. 117). Huberman (1996) urges inquirers “to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors” (p. 138), and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) believe “each separate piece of teacher research can inform not only subsequent activities in an individual teacher’s classroom, but also potentially informs and is informed by all teacher research past and present” (p. 315). This process of using the past to understand the present honors inquiry’s roots in the work of John Dewey (White, 2013), as well as the reinvigoration of teacher research through the conceptualization of inquiry as stance. Indeed, this dissertation was expressly designed to heed Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2001) request that inquiry “be understood not primarily as personal and professional accomplishment, but as a lifelong stance and a long-term collective project with a democratic agenda” (p. 56). Carrying my design to fruition enabled me to “discover, capture, present, and preserve” the experiences of my participants (Patton, 2002, p. 196), affirming their commitments to democratic and socially just education and sustaining the practitioner inquiry movement writ large. Without further ado, I turn to the narrative portraits themselves.
CHAPTER 4
CINDY’S STORY

Cindy introduced herself to me as “a teacher out of the '60s,” and as a definite freethinker, she allows her mind to play at an extraordinary pace. She talks just fast enough to keep up with her thoughts, and her enthusiasm about her own ideas—particularly when they arrive mid-conversation—is contagious. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that Cindy is not exactly retired, despite “technically” taking that step in 2012, when the Accountability Era, in her eyes, began to escalate. Not content to stray too far from students, she currently works as a literacy specialist as well as a teacher educator.

By virtue of her inquiry stance, she has managed, in the course of her professional lifetime, to find a number of niche positions, and she shows no signs of slowing down.

The Formative and Transformative Years

Cindy grew up outside of Chicago in the 1950s, attending what she describes as “pretty good” public schools in a “middle-class environment.” She remembers “generally liking school,” offering the lukewarm praise that “it was basically not boring,” such that she “learned a lot without being deeply engaged” or having to make sense of things. Her future career, unbeknownst to her at the time, would offer abundant opportunities for the sense-making she seemed to lack in primary school.

In Cindy’s young mind, students in other classes “got to do cool stuff,” and she recognized even then how tracking accounted for the difference, admitting, “I always sort of resented that I wasn’t in what they considered the lower IQ group.” In contrast, Cindy’s track “took in a lot of stuff,” indicating a more transmission-style pedagogy. Consequently, Cindy’s parents agreed she should skip a grade, which, despite providing some necessary academic challenge, also presented a more personal
obstacle: “I went from being what I felt or what was thought of as one of the smartest kids…to this high IQ class where I really wasn’t.” High school compounded this situation in a “heavily tracked” and “really competitive” environment, “so some of the things that should have been fun weren’t.”

Reading always stood as an exception to this rule, especially for the child of two avid readers. The household devoted whole Saturdays to reading, at a time “when books were really adventures,” and Cindy reports being far more engaged in language arts than other subjects during elementary school. She also speaks highly of her high school English classes, able not only to recall each teacher, but also particular books and discussions. Curiously, the now-gregarious Cindy “was somewhat silent” in these moments and “didn’t always fully participate,” although then as now, she was a careful listener. She viewed her classmates as “very sophisticated,” and perhaps she worried she could not compete with their “brilliant” ideas.

Her freshman English teacher might tell an entirely different story. During their discussion of Homer’s *Odyssey*, he was “very welcoming of all kinds of contributions.” Cindy offered a response “that wasn’t in the mainstream” but “connect[ed] to real life, so […] he took it seriously.” This clearly resonated with Cindy, who, despite her constant, bubbling laugh and cheerful demeanor, always takes children seriously. She notes how “struck” she was in 9th grade English to learn “you could say things from your ordinary knowledge.” This, then, is a turning point in Cindy’s journey, where school became less about going through the motions because the barrier between academic knowledge and “ordinary knowledge” started to dissolve. Conversation was the key.
Outside of school, Cindy relished any opportunity to talk with younger kids in her neighborhood. Indeed, she could “lose time” because of her fascination with how children talked. She carried that interest with her when she “came east to school […] to get out of the Midwest” and began a new phase of life as an undergraduate at Barnard College in New York City, one of those “hot, exciting places in those days politically.” Though Cindy enrolled at Barnard sight unseen, her mother had visited and described “leaflets up all over the place for meetings for […] different sorts of causes,” piquing Cindy’s interest and promising a more “bohemian” or “multicultural” environment.

She nurtured her growing interest in language and communication by majoring in history with a minor in Greek, often imbuing her papers with sociolinguistic analysis, a burgeoning school of thought. After graduating in 1970, she contemplated graduate school but instead got involved with the GI movement in opposition to the Vietnam War. A lesser-known piece of larger antiwar demonstrations, the GI movement consisted of members of the military who were against the very war they were expected to fight. In support of these efforts, Cindy worked in a “GI coffeehouse” near Westover Air Reserve Base in Springfield, Massachusetts, a venue offering GIs legal and logistical advice.

This was an incredibly “transformative” experience, enabling Cindy to meet a lot of people who “were doing a lot of very brave things […] and whose relation to schooling was somewhat different” than her own. Although many of the servicemen had “less formal education than [she] was used to,” Cindy credits her own informal education to them, noting, “I learned a lot from what they knew.” In a way, this was the bohemian, multicultural experience she had sought as an undergrad: she “learned a lot about all the differences among us,” simultaneously heightening her awareness of
herself and the environment in which she had been raised. Because the GIs were “people [she] wouldn’t have known,” which is to say, “people who weren’t part of [her] neighborhood,” she accrued “experience of the kind of full range” of humanity and discovered, “It’s more fun to know lots of different ways to be.” In particular, she became intrigued by the storytelling and joking she noticed among African-Americans and the white working class, observations that would later inform her approach to teaching.

**Hearing and Heeding the Call to the Classroom**

The daughter of a doctor, Cindy began to understand the impact of her middle-class upbringing as her interest in stories and language continued to crystallize. After getting married and having two children, Cindy put these interests to work in a new daycare likely inspired, she thinks, by President Johnson’s Great Society campaign as part of the War on Poverty. Despite these good intentions, “it was a pretty rocky start,” particularly “without any real expertise.” Cindy admits, “When I look back, I didn’t know what I was doing, and neither did anybody else, pretty much.” A great society, it seemed, needed more than good intentions.

Fortunately, the daycare connected with the preschool unit of the Cambridge-Somerville Department of Mental Health, which had piloted a program to see if “a good nursery school with some clinical perspective would be a good way to help kids […] referred by teachers as lacking preparation or behaving poorly.” The model was so inspiring that Cindy joined their ranks, first as a teacher’s aide and then as a teacher herself. Her journey to the classroom, then, was a winding and untraditional path, and she views teaching as a calling she initially failed to recognize. Embracing the clinical perspective enabled her to see a profound connection between her longstanding interests in children, language, and literature.
While working at the daycare, Cindy had begun to “recognize some real difference in the language between those who came from African-American families and kids who didn’t.” Transitioning to the clinical school provided opportunities to continue to explore cultural and linguistic differences, and it also meant being “where people really had some expertise and could share it.” One particular expert was Sam Braun, director of the clinical nursery school. As “a great child psychiatrist,” Sam had extensive education, yet he was “super grounded.” He was also “unconventional,” capable of making “unexpected connections” as he showed Cindy how to work with “traumatized” children by “honor[ing] them.” He remained “deeply engaged” in their experiences and “took them seriously. He didn’t categorize them.” One child in particular, approximately 4 years old, “seemed to want to be in small, enclosed places.” Sam simply “brought him a sleeping bag” so the child could “be at school and pay attention and do what he was supposed to do.” Sam’s belief, which rubbed off on Cindy, was that if children “were asking for something, they probably needed it,” so it was the teachers’ responsibility “to figure out a way they could have it and we could still do what we needed to do.”

Sam’s extraordinary flexibility, in that “he was always bending these rules,” meant working with him provided “the best learning environment […] because it wasn’t just theory and it wasn’t just practice. […] You could enjoy yourself and you could see that you were effective and you were learning all the time.” He and his colleagues profoundly impacted Cindy’s trajectory. In fact, Cindy attributes the advent of her inquiry stance to Sam because she believes he had one of his own. He was, she recalls, very insightful about the kinds of assumptions that middle-class people make about other people who aren’t so middle class, so we always took the kind of stance of inquiry towards what kids might know and what they might know that I didn’t know.
The experience of working for and with Sam in this praxis-rich environment was “mind-opening,” and Cindy spent most of the 1980s relishing every bit of it. Following the example of her well-educated clinical colleagues, she also decided to pursue a master’s degree in early childhood special education, graduating in 1984 and effectively cementing her career choice. In other words, she officially answered the once-ignored call, and, as she tells it, “connecting with the preschool unit was the crucial piece.”

**A Teacher in Transition**

When the nursery school was subsumed by the public school system in the late 1980s, Cindy began working with various early childhood special education programs. This was a time when the Boston area saw a rise in immigration from Haiti, and Haitian children “started getting referred to early childhood special ed. because they just didn’t […] seem to fit.” Cindy recalls how one student came to her with a recorded IQ of 70, “and after I had him a little while, his IQ was 107, see, so I had ‘cured’ him.” Skeptical of this miracle, Cindy presumed “there was a mistake somewhere in there,” especially when “that’s what kept happening.” In addition to IQ tests, students faced a barrage of other assessments, resulting in a “bimodal distribution in terms of the testing scores, with a bunch of kids on the lower end and a bunch of kids on the high, high level.”

Whenever Cindy mentions standardized tests, she maintains, “it has nothing to do with their intelligence,” and she considers herself fortunate to have worked with colleagues and administrators who can stay focused on equity above and beyond quantitative measures. Her nascent inquiry stance helped her identify “cultural misunderstandings” at work. She recognized, for instance, that the Haitian immigrants did not, in fact, speak French. Rather, given their lower socioeconomic status,
They spoke only Creole, but they would sometimes say they spoke French because [speaking Creole] was sort of a sign that they were not educated, and so then the kid would be tested in French, when somebody decided to test him, and he wouldn’t do well because he didn’t speak French.

Cindy was not content with this status quo, even though her ability to magically raise students’ test scores made her look pretty good. She was passingly fluent in French, but she took it upon herself to learn Creole, in part, to be of greater service to the students, but also because “amazing things,” including the “extraordinary abilities” of the parents, often piqued her curiosity during her interactions with the Haitians.

This experience ultimately led to a new role for Cindy, teaching at and later directing a school as part of the Haitian Multiservice Center in Dorchester. With minimal oversight, Cindy had freedom and autonomy to design and adapt her instruction to fit her students: “If the kids seemed to be engaged,” everyone was happy. She maintained this attitude in future teaching positions, even as “testing became […] a stronger concern.” The experience of having served in an administrative role gives Cindy some perspective on what principals endure: “It was overwhelming work” and “really just too much at times,” especially because Cindy “had two young children at home” and was also en route to a Ph.D. It was a rewarding but also tumultuous time of transition.

**A Teacher Researcher is Born**

Cindy returned to graduate school to pursue a doctorate in applied psycholinguistics. Her advisor, Jim Gee, played a “really important” role in Cindy’s life, both in his in-person mentorship and in his scholarship, among “the most influential things” she has ever read. As a fellow “humanities-educated person,” Cindy appreciated the parallels he drew between “African-American children telling stories,” and ancient oral traditions. She was fascinated by Jim’s ability
to look at kids from the perspective of…whatever you want to call that…higher culture and recognize in…in a variety of things that children might do, but even in some of the things that aren’t respected, that kind of tradition.

Like Sam, in other words, he took children very seriously, which in Cindy’s eyes, makes him “definitely a real hero.”

Not only did Jim patiently mentor Cindy along her protracted path to completion, but he also encouraged her to attempt a teacher research dissertation. This was a radical concept in the early ’90s, such that Jim and his colleague, Cathy O’Connor, “ran interference with […] the powers at Boston University to get that through because it hadn’t been done there before.” Although Cindy had long been bringing her natural curiosity to bear on everyday practice—and in a variety of settings, at that—connecting with Jim was instrumental in formalizing her approach and officially inducting her into the teacher research community.

**The Glory Days of the Brookline Group**

Cindy’s Ph.D., though “useful,” is less important to her than the valuable lessons she learned from Jim, as well as her introduction to the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar (BTRS), started in the late ’80s by a former speech-language pathologist whose interest in children’s talk prompted him, much like Cindy, to go to graduate school, where he, too, studied under Jim Gee. With guidance from Jim and Sarah Michaels, and with financial support from the Mellon Foundation, BTRS consisted of “a bunch of teachers […] interested in exploring discourse differences” among their students in Brookline, Massachusetts, a diverse community with cross-town bussing.

Inspired by the “great anthropologist” Del Hymes, who had issued “a kind of a call to teachers,” BTRS endeavored “to look at the linguistic differences among their
students as a source of who got privilege and who didn’t,” noting “the difference between the way they were responded to depending on the discourse style that they used.” Hymes had articulated a great need for such studies, intentionally advocating “for teachers to do the primary research, with the help […] of higher ed. people.” Sarah Michaels was especially passionate about this challenge, mentoring BTRS teachers as they articulated “narrative differences in African-American kids and white kids,” and wrote about how “white initially but also black teachers generally responded to these differences.” According to Cindy, it was a “revelatory” experience.

In particular, Sarah taught Cindy the art of “turning something annoying into something interesting and something that could be researched.” In other words, paying closer attention to her problems of practice, chiefly by recording classroom interactions, helped Cindy understand “what wasn’t working” and how to make positive adjustments. Moments of annoyance are never just about students and their behavior. Instead, “the things they say that are interesting or annoying […] could also be defined as those things I wouldn’t say or do,” prompting Cindy to self-reflect.

At Sarah’s urging, Cindy and the others began transcribing “things that got said in the classroom,” somehow finding the time and energy. Cindy explains, “We just did it.” They were motivated by the discovery of “either annoying moments or moments when kids took off, so it was always moments where they did whatever we didn’t expect them to do.” As systematic inquirers, members of the group would each receive a copy of someone’s transcript and take on the role of a student: “your job was to speak the lines of whatever kid and then to share what you thought that kid was thinking. So, you were kind of responsible for making sense of that kid.” Understandably, this resulted in
learning “huge amounts” about their students, but also, more broadly, “huge amounts about teaching,” especially when they “broke into small groups depending on the topics” that piqued their individual interests or needs.

Initially, Sarah and Cathy attended the meetings, helping the group notice language differences and serving as de facto teacher educators. Mostly, though, BTRS was self-directed, perhaps explaining why they continued to meet, sometimes weekly, for nearly a decade, well into the ’90s. Cindy also attributes the longevity of the group to the fact that they really took their work seriously, right down to the snacks:

We didn’t bring crappy food, you know. A lot of times when you go to professional development, somebody brings Doritos or something, but we took turns, and we brought important food, and that really, you know, that was sort of a measure of how people felt about the group. When it was your turn, you tried to come up with something good.

During this “incredible period,” meetings took on a communal, ritual quality, and members became friends, especially when they were able to “rent a house” during the summer to “go away and write.” Voluntary participation was key, although the group—which ranged between 8 and 12 members—did receive a modest stipend.

**Taking Teacher Research on the Road**

Because of BTRS grant support, Cindy presented at one of the first-ever Teacher Researcher Days, part of the Penn Ethnography Forum. Del Hymes had established the forum in 1980, and Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith advocated for the addition of a teacher research component in the mid-1980s (Hornberger, 2002). Cindy and her peers “did a whole presentation there, and that was huge because we met a bunch of people and we had to create these real talks […], and that sort of got the whole thing rolling.” She notes, “The Penn Ethnography Forum is a very special place for teacher
researchers,” providing the chance to interact with scholars like Susan Lytle, Marilyn Cochran-Smith, and Ken Zeichner.

The Teacher Researcher Day made such an indelible impression, in part, because of its relationship to the larger Ethnography Forum, such that “everything around you is anthropology.” Simply “being around the anthropologists was just really rich” for developing her inquiry stance, since their discipline “keeps you, as they say, making the familiar strange” or “making things strange and curious.” It is truly astounding to hear Cindy talk in detail about presentations she attended thirty years ago, all of which taught her to see how in many, many contexts, from barbershops to emergency rooms, “there were patterns” that were both interesting in their own right and “connected to the communities” that gave rise to them.

This disciplinary framework supported Cindy’s natural curiosity in—and out of—the classroom. She offers a telling example from recess:

You start to recognize things, […] and you can start to incorporate that rather than thinking it’s just something kids do outside. […] If you see kids fussing with each other—something that I used to see, and I didn’t know how to deal with it, you begin to understand that’s something African-American girls do, and it’s a whole argumentation style, and they need to practice so they can get better at it. […] You start to see patterns in what kids are doing. If you’ve ever seen kids argue, it’s amazing. When kids argue, it’s really an art form.

As a budding ethnographer, Cindy honored and affirmed her students’ cultural backgrounds while deepening her understanding of the role language plays in learning.

**Inquiry at Work**

Because of her supportive mentors and fellow BTRS teachers, in addition to her own natural proclivities, inquiry “quickly became a habit.” Cindy reasons, “I think it just suited […] the way I look at what’s interesting in the world, which has always been the
different ways people are.” Cindy’s openness to these different ways of being gave rise to a number of inquiries. While a member of BTRS, she became interested in classroom management, noticing significant differences between her own—admittedly sometimes-ineffectual—style and that of her Haitian colleagues. By engaging in dialogue and self-reflection, she discovered, “they related to students in different ways and got them to be quiet easily.” Specifically, whereas Cindy was more likely to focus on an individual student who had misbehaved, essentially saying, “What you’re doing is wrong. Don’t do it,” her peers took more of a “group approach, you know, with sort of a moral code, like, ‘Would you want your parents to see you acting like that?’” Thus, Cindy was able to parlay her sociolinguistic skills as a way to further her development as an educator.

In most cases, Cindy put her keen ear for language to work in her own classroom, following Sarah Michaels’s advice to record her students whenever possible. Her fondest memory of this is the time one of the recorders picked up a conversation students were having about a book called *The Three Robbers* (Ungerer, 1961). Cindy will never forget how much her students loved that book, noting, “They’d steal it all the time, and they’d want me to read it, and I couldn’t find it to read it because somebody had put it in his cubby.” One day, “There were these two little guys who were talking to each other with the book, and one of them turned to the page and said, ‘The robbers become good here.’” Cindy was really impressed with their ability to connect with the story, noticing the nuance of the characters and pointing to specific textual evidence.

In another scenario, Cindy’s initial inquiry took into account the Haitian students’ home environments. During a science lesson on mold, she wondered, “How are these kids whose backgrounds are not literate going to represent the differences in the
amount of mold that grows on the bread in different circumstances?” Knowing their parents “couldn’t read or write well,” she anticipated “a difference in the way they chose to represent the amounts of mold.” While Cindy was curious about and open to whatever mode of representation the students selected, the inquiry veered in a new direction when her students started talking about how “the bread is like the mom, and it’s alive, and it’s growing like a mom, and when it’s warm, it grows more.” Flexing her inquiry stance, Cindy found a way to connect to a “standard curriculum question” of “what counts as being alive,” wanting her students to recognize the living properties of the mold. Instead, one student suggested—and “brought the whole class” on board with—“the idea that the sun is alive, and that’s what [they] ended up doing a lot of work about: how the sun changes and watching it move and then the water cycle, somehow.”

Indeed, bringing an inquiry stance to the classroom gave Cindy a relaxed attitude that “somehow” they would cover the curriculum, and they “covered everything. It was not a problem.” Not only that, but just as Cindy had developed a habit of sharing her learning with other teachers, she arranged for “each little group of kids” to “give a talk” to the kindergarteners. Cindy remembers one kindergarten teacher was wondering about condensation or something, and this girl says, ‘Did you…do you have a water bottle? Do you have a bottle of water?’ And she says, ‘Yeah.’ And she says, ‘Could I see it?’ So, she grabs it and shows the condensation on the Polar Spring thing, which I’d never even noticed, that just a bottle of water often has condensation on the top, but she had been noticing it, you know. She’d been seeing condensation everywhere.

In Cindy’s mind, her students “had a much better understanding of things than kids normally get when they come through some sort of curriculum.”

As a teacher researcher, Cindy also brought her inquiry stance into her lesson planning. She would “have notes from the previous day, and […] get to school early and
read them” in order to “figure out what to do next from that,” a much different approach than “planning a week in advance and thinking, ‘Ok, after this, you know, the curriculum requires that we go here.’” Cindy firmly believes, “you end up at the same place, but you could go by a different route.” Much like her professional path, it was a valuable albeit nontraditional journey.

**A Search for Knowledge**

In the early 1990s, as Cindy was getting closer to a Ph.D., she went to work at TERC, contributing to a professional development initiative sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. Originally known as Technical Education Research Centers, and established in 1965, TERC continues to operate “at the frontiers of theory and practice to contribute to a deeper understanding of learning and teaching” (TERC, 2018, para. 2). In particular, Cindy worked with the Chèche Konnen Center, named after “search for knowledge” in Haitian Creole (TERC, 2014, para. 1). Thus, the position was a perfect fit for Cindy and her inquiry stance. Alongside “excellent colleagues,” she investigated “teachers doing inquiries on their students’ scientific understanding at the same time as the teachers themselves were learning science together,” which benefited all involved.

While at TERC, Cindy attempted to recreate the magic of BTRS. The use of classroom video—much like her earlier experiences with audio recordings—had a powerful effect, opening everyone’s mind—including Cindy’s—to multiple approaches to knowledge and various ways to think scientifically. The group was especially interested in African-American students’ use of “argumentation styles and storytelling styles that were maybe, you know, too funny or too dramatic or something for what the teachers were expecting.” By expanding their minds and seeing “much more broadly,” the
teachers discovered “the science in those accounts,” and “could really include the full range of kids in their classes.” True to the ideals of teacher research, these collaborative efforts improved teaching and learning for the sake of all learners.

**Putting New Knowledge into Practice**

After about 8 years of witnessing powerful epiphanies at TERC, Cindy “couldn’t stand it any longer […] because [she] had just learned too much from watching, and it didn’t seem fair” not to put her new insights to work with students of her own. She recalls thinking, “I do know some stuff that I need to, you know, put into action.” Thus, she decided to return to teaching at King Open, a teacher-created school in Cambridge. Starting with a part-time position, which enabled her to keep one foot at TERC, Cindy helped students who were transitioning out of the Haitian bilingual program.

This was obviously a transition for Cindy, too, and it was not always easy. Despite her eagerness to have her own young students again, she fretted about being among “other people who had more experience,” as well as more extensive knowledge of disciplinary jargon. Having maintained a connection with Susan Lytle, Cindy shared her concerns, saying, “I don’t even know what guided reading is.” Susan simply responded, “And I’m the last person you’re going to say that to.” In retrospect, Cindy realizes she “was sort of scrambling […] for the first year or two,” and she recognizes how Susan was “trying to tell [her] that what [she] knew was equally important.”

In time, as Cindy settled into a full-time position that would span more than a decade, she embraced her role as a reading specialist and science teacher. King Open thus provided ample opportunities for Cindy to maintain her interest in language, while also using elementary science instruction as fertile ground for teacher research. She remembers these years fondly, as King Open “was such a great school” with a collegial
atmosphere, where “people developed the most amazing curriculum.” Cindy’s public
school experience falls “at the sort of left end of things,” in that she was shielded from
the top-down, standardized environment. Nevertheless,

Among the things I learned was that we couldn’t solve the achievement
gap. As good a school as it was, I think everybody there felt respected,
and everybody learned more than they might have, but the achievement
gap was still there, so that stayed in my mind.

In spite of these odds, Cindy relished the opportunity to bring her own K-12 experience,
coupled with what she saw at TERC, to the classroom: “when I’m watching kids, for
example, looking at literature, I feel like I’ve been taught literature very well, so I can see
[…] a broad range of literary response.” In other words, Cindy pairs her strong content
knowledge with her asset view of all learners.

Whereas she believes teachers today struggle first and foremost with a lack of
time, Cindy’s perspective insulates her from that obstacle, which was especially true at
King Open. She has “developed the ability to see [her] objectives being met all over the
place,” which sometimes sets her apart from other teachers. She illustrates:

Are kids connecting to a character or […] are they predicting or are they
recognizing the sort of trajectory of a novel or connecting the historical
setting? I can see them doing that […] so, I think that makes it easier for
me because I don’t feel like you have to corral the conversation.

This is not to say Cindy takes a passive role: she draws on students’ “questions and
responses [to] shape the conversation as a participant.” Rather than “lay it all out before
they are curious,” such as announcing, “Today we’re going to look at the historical
context of A Raisin in the Sun,” Cindy knows “kids will say these interesting things, like,
‘They did that back in the day?’ […] and you realize that they’re shocked that they didn’t
know. Why tell them ahead of time? Let them experience it.” Motivated by Sontag’s
(2012) belief that “any situation between people, when they are really human with each
other, produces ‘intelligence’” (p. 59), Cindy strives to “stop being such a teacher and become a fellow, […] more experienced participant.” She recognizes how hard this can be, especially “the first couple of years you teach,” but she claims, “If you know that’s your goal, then you notice the moments where it happens,” so that “even as a young teacher, if you label those moments when that happens, it’ll help you end up there.”

This attitude permeates her stories about conducting teacher research, such as “when the whole class decided they were going to do something other than what I wanted them to do.” Her flexible inquiry stance enabled her to follow the students’ lead, especially when they had “some other interest that made sense.” In addition to drawing on the foundation she inherited from Sarah Michaels—turning something “annoying” into something “interesting,” she also notes how an inquiry can arise from working with “a kid who’s not performing well, you know, by some standard.” Thus, her approach to teacher inquiry involves moments where you take what kids are doing or saying […] and wonder about the broader context. […] You wonder both why they’re saying it and how does it connect with an intellectual tradition, so that you can use it to, you know, promote their academic achievement.

That goal is always in mind, though Cindy is consistently critical of high-stakes tests. She recognizes how she can mitigate the negative impact of metrics by focusing her attention on specific students. When Cindy notices, for instance, that a student’s inferences from a text seem “bizarre” or unwarranted, “the inquiry begins.”

If she does not happen to be recording any audio, she simply jots down her observations: “sometimes, I’m quick enough to ask the kid to say more about it then, but often, I just think about it later and try to make sense…try to figure out what the kid was thinking.” Pursuing these wonderings leads Cindy to broader, more abstract questions
with implications for all learners. One “animating” question that seems to “overarch” her inquiries is “What do kids do with literature?” or in other words, “What are the actual things kids get out of reading?” For example, while discussing a text with a student who had an incorrect but nevertheless “very powerful picture in his mind,” Cindy created space in the conversation for the student to make that picture known because “it makes a lot of sense, and helping him to see what he did, I think, made a lot of sense.” This ultimately prompted her interest in other students’ inferences, as well as the more philosophical questions of what exactly inferences are and whether they might foster empathy. She is eager to test her theory that “if [students] explore each other’s inferences, they might understand each other better.” Although these investigations are not as systematic and clearly defined as more traditional forms of teacher research, they do take on an iterative rhythm, and Cindy often has “a couple kids cycling at once.”

Undergirding her curiosity is a fervent belief that “kids are always making sense.” Knowing this, she reasons, is “a much better way than the usual one of saying we have high standards for all.” This was a core belief of BTRS, and it came to be so deeply ingrained that they were always surprised when others reacted as though it were an astounding epiphany: “Do you really think so?” They really did, and Cindy still does. Operating from this stance, Cindy will go from “What does he get out of that? Why does he do that?” to “What does that tell me about what other kids are missing and maybe what I’m missing?” Her willingness to position herself as a learner is crucial. Far too often, she admits, teachers “go so quickly to saying, ‘Ok. The reason this happened is […],’ rather than sort of being in the moment in the book.” Cindy is deeply invested in
helping students experience literature—as she did, when she was a child—and that means allowing them to fumble around a bit.

Embracing the challenge of trying to figure out where students are coming from promotes some pretty healthy habits, such as taking good notes, talking with students, and seeking insight from colleagues. She explains, “Writing down the question is a good thing because then you can share it with someone else because you remember it, and sharing it with someone else is how it really turns into a broader thing.” A keen observer, Cindy not only notices what students say or do, but she also pays close attention to the reactions of her critical friends, which then deepen and inform her own understanding. Although she is “always looking for teachers” to serve as a sounding board, she can also point to moments when sharing a “funny” classroom story with the school secretary “or others not directly involved” prompted a mini-epiphany. She has learned “you just never know who’s going to tell you something,” which is why, for all of her enthusiastic chatter, Cindy is also an insatiable listener.

Because she has such a vigorous inquiry stance, Cindy is primed to recognize curiosity in others, chiefly her students. As a classroom teacher, she spent a lot of time wondering, “how does this kid who seems to be behind…how does his question inform everyone, so that if we’re going to pursue him and his understanding, how’s that going to work for everybody?” Once, during an interactive lesson on evaporation, a bewildered student wondered where the water in a cup went because the cup had no hole. Cindy recalled, “At first we just ‘fixed’ him. We tell him, ‘No. No. It goes up.’” Her inquiry stance, she believes, helped her “to recognize that he was really wondering.” When she instinctively felt “that genuine feeling,” it made her understand how “he was really there,”
asking what was “actually a pretty good question.” For Cindy, an inquiry stance is not just about her own curiosity: the disposition enables her to recognize and value her students’ curiosity. Even in retirement, Cindy keeps this magical momentum going.

**A Retiree in Name Only**

In the Age of Accountability, “the model for teaching in Cambridge changed so that they became test-obsessed,” and Cindy found herself growing frustrated “in relation to how much people were concerned about test scores.” When a new administrator seemed somewhat removed from or unaware of King Open’s foundational values, Cindy decided it was time to retire. The level of teacher autonomy waned, and along with it, “all of this amazing curriculum” that teachers would generate—reinforced by the school’s embrace of looping—“just faded.” Cindy explained how “two years makes a huge difference in your understanding of a child,” all the more so for “the kids who aren’t thriving,” and she reported how the teacher-generated curricula really seemed to stick with students, so she was sad to see that disappear.

Cindy transitioned to Tufts University, working for 5 years in their urban teacher preparation program. As a teacher educator, Cindy found herself “having to speak what [she] knew” or “having to figure out what [she] knew so [she] could tell other people.” It was thus another formative experience, yet she admits this phase contained “moments of tragedy, of small but deep tragedy.” Even in her current work, she gets frustrated “when [she] see[s] a kid being misunderstood” and longs to “be the person in front of that kid” to avoid the student’s being “either silenced in a nice way, corrected in a nice way, or [...] kicked out.” These moments were especially prevalent when she observed student teachers and witnessed their mentors in action: “I felt beat up often watching kids, the way they were treated by teachers that I really didn’t exactly know.” She
admits, “They were nice teachers, but they just didn’t have that perspective,” namely an inquiry stance and an asset view.

Although “there was never a way to connect very effectively with the mentor teachers,” Cindy did, of course, know the student teachers. She modeled an inquiry stance for them, in part, by discussing these difficult moments. Wherever possible, she advocated for them to be able to try out different things, and was grateful to be working with graduate students, who were old enough to take responsible risks. One student teacher, in a particularly challenging early childhood placement, ruffled her mentor’s feathers when, during “morning meeting, […] two of the most difficult kids got up and took over the chart board and sort of drew some things for her on her topic.” Despite the mentor’s complaints, Cindy recalls being proud that her intern “could go with it,” especially when, upon review, what the students had done on the board “was very complicated and very good.” Similarly “painful” experiences ultimately convinced Cindy she could no longer be a supervisor.

As director of teacher preparation at Tufts, Cindy shared her passion for teacher research, helping pre-service teachers cultivate the habit of “identifying something annoying and then inquiring.” Cindy currently serves as a teacher educator at Columbia, and though she continues to cultivate an inquiry stance in young teachers, she finds

It’s become much more problematic to be doing research in schools, and so I just don’t like to draw attention to it because people are getting crazy. […] When I was at Tufts, to get permission for my grad students to videotape was almost impossible because everybody’s so paranoid and insane.

Facing similar constraints in New York, Cindy and her students “just fly as low as we possibly can below the radar.” She worries about how “the sort of IRB thing has totally backfired” in that the good intent to account for ethical considerations can ultimately
constrain “simple, for your own practice but you might want to share it with some people, teacher stuff. […] It’s just made it much too cumbersome, and […] that’s a terrible, terrible thing.” In spite of these challenges, Cindy perseveres as a teacher educator because “it really matters,” yielding multiple levels of impact.

Cindy continues to have a K-12 impact, too. In her current work as a literacy specialist, she still notes students’ understanding and is in some ways better positioned to do so. She acknowledges, for instance, how interacting with classroom teachers leads her to believe she is “definitely […] different” in terms of the amount of time she is willing and able to give to individual students. This translates to a “sensitivity to real argumentative responses” that can be overlooked when adhering to pacing guides. To illustrate, she shares the story of a student’s strong reaction to a lesson on Hinduism:

He was really mad about the caste system, and it seemed like such an obvious place to go. […] ‘Let’s listen to [him] talk about why he hates the caste system.’ […] He would have added a lot of intellectual energy, and he would have had a chance to shine, and I feel like that just happens so rarely now, and I can hear these kids saying interesting things that could be picked up.

Cindy’s inquiry stance keeps her keenly attuned to these moments, whereas other teachers are “just overwhelmed” by pressure to accomplish what is in the curriculum, which often induces teaching to the test. She continues,

They forget that they don’t know why there’s a caste system! Or at least, I don’t, and I don’t think they do either…and just how such a seemingly bizarre thing got set up, so he’s asking the real question, as opposed to ‘What are the 4 castes? Ok. Let’s list them.’

Cindy is now in a role where she can look at classroom teachers and see what they are going through, but even when she was a classroom teacher, she found time for those real questions while accomplishing the curriculum. Integrating those two goals was key, for “one thing that sort of goes along with thinking kids are always making sense is
thinking the kid who seems to be making the least sense is the canary in the coal mine.”
In the story above, for example, the angry student is “likely to have the best idea for how
to think about Hinduism” because he is grappling so intensely with the concept. Cindy’s
persistent inquiry stance treats his strong emotional reaction as an opportunity for
wondering rather than a discipline problem.

In addition to maintaining her inquiry stance, Cindy also manages to keep in
touch with a few fellow members of BTRS, including Sarah Michaels. She explains, “We
have fun because we’re both obsessed with transcripts,” always eager to discuss how
kids can “learn to talk themselves into an understanding.” Sarah “keeps telling [her] to
record more,” but these days, Cindy prefers to “just scribble.” She follows the BTRS
model of sharing her observations with others, namely the students’ teachers, as they
are “often things […] the teachers wouldn’t have given a lot of interest in, […] things that
teachers often, with the curriculum on their mind, have to sort of ignore because they’re
going somewhere.” Cindy, of course, is “going somewhere,” too: to a place of deeper
understanding. Untethered by the curriculum—not that she ever let it hold her down,
even as a classroom teacher—she is free to let her inquiry stance guide her.

Admittedly, Cindy has “been having to kind of hunt” for critical friends of the sort
she enjoyed within BTRS. Most teachers are “not accustomed to the Brookline way of
doing things,” but they are, at least, receptive to her insight, particularly when she
shares it in subtle ways, chiefly through anecdotes. This “reminds everybody why they
grew into teaching: […] they think kids are really fun, and it’s really fun to, you know,
figure out information with them, but you lose track of it.” In the Age of Accountability,
the concept of socially constructed knowledge falls by the wayside, as the proliferation of standardized tests reinforces a more transmission-style pedagogy.

In particular, Cindy has some strong opinions on the subject of standards, especially “all those objectives that people have to write up now about what they’re going to do when they’re teaching literature.” She is very dubious of efforts to account for every moment of instructional time prior to a lesson. When objectives are too specific, she worries teachers are unable to welcome and respond to students’ questions or perspectives. When discussing Jerry Spinelli’s (1996) *Crash*, for instance, Cindy discovered a scene she had always interpreted as funny had a profoundly different effect on her students. By noticing their misunderstanding of a textual detail and allowing them to elaborate on their rationale, she “realized that they had such a strong sense of what a tremendous breakdown could come from losing a grandfather.” In other words, “they helped [her] see the book” because she allowed them “to talk about things that are important to them,” regardless of the day’s standards or objectives.

In the *No Child Left Behind* era, however, multiple-choice questions inevitably require one hard-and-fast response, discouraging multi-perspectival thinking. Still, Cindy concedes she and her fellow teachers “out of the ’60s” could have benefitted from giving more thought to their objectives. Admitting she “didn’t plan all that much,” she was known to “forget holidays” because she “just wasn’t organized in that kind of way,” and yet, “the kids were learning” and everything “was getting done.” As a teacher with an inquiry stance, she was systematic and intentional in the way she let her wonderings inform her practice, which meant she could not predict how long they might spend on a particular text. She notes, “You can’t do that now. You absolutely can’t do that now.”
On the other hand, Cindy has noticed how “there are so many meetings in order to make sure the curriculum is getting done,” resulting in “not enough time to think.” Even when schools are able to reduce or mitigate the amount of testing, Cindy points to a palpable mindset shift: “Teachers think in terms of levels of kids [and] categories in rank order.” Thus, although a friend of Cindy’s is quick to point a finger at Pearson’s nefarious attempt to “destroy public education,” Cindy sees a more epistemological root cause. She associates the current belief that “everything has to be testable” with trends in psychology and other clinical fields “to medicate rather than […] listen to people.” In other words, “everything’s more quantitative than qualitative.” Adhering to her foundational interest in anthropology, Cindy goes against this grain, rejecting the idea that wherever there is “a looseness, […] we have to tighten up.” Indeed, she sees these trends as “a reaction to the ’60s,” which essentially makes them antithetical to her core professional identity. Cindy recognizes the “political attitudes” at play in these debates, recalling how “People, for example, in the literacy wars, who really pushed phonics were altogether tied into a more traditional view of the country.” Given her extensive experience with immigrants, Cindy has a decidedly different perspective.

In her current work, Cindy encountered a teacher who assigned many students their home countries during a social studies unit. One student was unusually engaged, and Cindy recognized how this was “one of the singular times when this kid wanted to do something,” but “the unit was so short he couldn’t finish what he wanted.” Not wanting the child’s curiosity to wane, Cindy approached the principal about the possibility of “some sort of independent study, […] so that he could follow his instincts or
his interests.” The student was “much more solid when he started talking about [his home country], kind of integrated,” and she felt empowered to advocate for him.

Cindy’s work with students empowers them, too. She got to know one student well when he started “reading the first book he’s ever liked, which is There’s a Boy in the Girl’s Bathroom” (Sachar, 1987). Cindy explains,

> I was just asking kids what they were reading and what genre it was. It was just sort of so I could find out what they were reading, but it was kind of [...] a check on whether they could use genre terms.

When the student misidentified his favorite book as nonfiction, the other students “tried to help him.” Knowing that “academically, he’s like the lowest kid in the class,” Cindy could tell he did not exactly “have status in this situation,” but he held steadfast to his interpretation, suggesting, “If it didn’t happen to the author, maybe it happened to the author’s brother.” Cindy admitted to being “really worried” about the student’s inability to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction, considering “he had been taught a million times,” yet her “inquiry stance” prompted her to take his ideas seriously. She did some research and found that some of the characters and events were definitely drawn from the author’s real-life experiences. Her student had been capable of “recognizing something about this book that [she] didn’t know,” which was actually “pretty amazing.”

> This was another instance in which teacher research prompted Cindy to learn about the discipline as well as the child because she “ended up looking at the book in a different way and seeing [...] how close it was, really, to memoir and how much there was that he was sensitive to [...] that [she] had never noticed.” Because her inquiry stance primes her to pay attention to these moments and to reflect on them, this incident “opened up [...] a whole new thing with watching kids read books” and using
their “really different responses” to “think about what we use literature for.” This is not a one-way process, for Cindy can also use new insights for “seeing things from earlier.”

The deep connection with this particular text, fostered through Cindy’s use of questions and willingness to entertain her students’ questions, led to an unexpected encounter between this student and a younger classmate, a 6th grader who was “just crying in the hall like crazy, just completely lost in tears.” Cindy knew who he was, so she “brought him into [her] room,” where he could settle down in one of her “comfortable reading chairs.” At that point, Cindy’s student “happened to walk in” for “his reading time, so we left [the 6th grader] there kind of moaning in the chair and did whatever we had to do.” When it was time for Cindy’s student to return to class,

He said he didn’t want to go back because he thought he could help [the 6th grader], and I had to leave. […] I shared this great big room with the math coach, so the math coach […] said she would make sure he didn’t destroy anything, so […] he stayed, and he counseled [the 6th grader], and she took notes for me because she realized I would want to know what happened, and he counseled [him] using words that came from There’s a Boy in the Girls Bathroom.

Cindy shared this “amazing” story as an example of how there might be a question “sort of in the back of [her] mind,” and sometimes “data appears that connects with it,” which encourages her to pursue the question more formally.

This story also illustrates how Cindy’s colleagues pick up on her inquiry stance, and her students do, too: “the fact that I can often remind them of […] words they used on previous days or weeks is something that makes our conversations more serious.” These serious conversations can, indeed, have serious consequences. One year, an eighth grader was heading towards “a separate class” in high school “because his IQ was low, and […] he was pretty low on most measures.” Ever skeptical of such quantitative categories, Cindy joined forces with colleagues to devote their collective
attention to this student in need. They all “took on an inquiry approach,” and “everybody would tell stories about what he was doing […] in their class,” so the group could make sense of the student and “discuss what was going on.” In a way, this was a more localized, perhaps less formal incarnation of BTRS, and in the end, “he didn’t go into the separate classroom,” and he also “gained some confidence.” Because the group openly discussed their plan with the student, he was invited to take ownership of his learning.

Attending to that one student “really made a big difference” on the individual level and also “helped other kids.” That is why she never hesitates to focus on a single student, especially one whom other teachers might see as problematic or “annoying.” In her current work, she encountered a 7th grader who was “rude” by all accounts and “was throwing everything off” in small group discussion, particularly because “he wouldn’t choose a book.” Although Cindy hesitates to officially call this “inquiry,” she did write about the student in her journal as a way to work through her thoughts about what to do, suspecting “what would work with another kid—being stern and strict” was not the right approach. Concerned the situation was “escalating down,” Cindy told herself, “I’ve got to reset” because “an inquiry stance is just recognizing it’s not the kid. There are many, many approaches,” and when one proves problematic, “you’ve got to find another.”

Unsurprisingly, Cindy the sociolinguist decided to just talk to the student and thus discovered “the only book he liked” was the autobiography of “a very short NBA player,” whose journey resonated with the exceptionally short student. Although “the library didn’t have it,” Cindy tracked down a copy of *Heart over Height* (Robinson & Finkel, 2014) so they could “start to talk about it” to address the student’s behavior while also reinforcing his literacy skills. Cindy reaps great reward from her work with kids: “I feel
like they’ve made progress, and they, you know, are quite willing to work with me, and they say interesting things. [...] I feel effective.” In all of her interactions with students, Cindy maintains an inquiry focus: “I always wonder where they’re coming from.”

With adults, Cindy is slightly less confident in her abilities. A few years ago, she was “responsible for the literacy PD at [her] school” and admits she was a little “too wimpy.” She endeavored to recreate the magic of BTRS by bringing in transcripts and focusing on “a couple of kids who people didn’t think were very thoughtful.” Cindy sought to counteract these perceptions by showing their teachers “some of the things that they had said about books,” but “they really seemed to think [she] was coming from left field.” Upon reflection, Cindy believes “it’s a continual process of learning what you have to tell people before you do this” in order to provide sufficient context and “explain so they’ll get a feel for it.” Cindy was hesitant to share the insights she had gleaned from teacher research or to lean on her scholarly expertise. One time when she happened to have used the phrase “Research tells us,” her audience was grateful:

I thought, ‘Well, shit. I should have been doing that all along!’ And I should have, but [...] it felt like pulling rank, so it was always difficult for me to say, ‘Look. I read this stuff, and this is what it said,’ [...] and it’s even more difficult for me to say, [...] ‘Experience tells me that this will probably work or is a good way to go.’ As long as I say ‘probably.’

Cindy recognizes teachers do not appreciate being told what to do, but she wishes she had “pushed” on occasion, such as when she “taught an afterschool class” for the district about a decade ago and asked teachers to come with transcripts of their own. Once again attempting to recreate BTRS, Cindy “felt [herself] falling kind of flat,” though “because it was a small group of people,” and they gathered on multiple occasions, she acknowledges, “something developed there.”
Ultimately, she believes, “It depends on where I am.” When speaking to “a bunch of science teachers,” for instance, Cindy intentionally used a video clip of a kindergarten teacher to foster discussion:

She was the least scientifically sophisticated, and [I] asked people to try and figure out what she was saying, hoping that that would…assuming that they would see that she was making a lot of sense and that she was in some ways even sort of unsettling the high school physics teachers who were in her group.

The experiment backfired when the group was unable to “see the kind of engagement and sort of fumbling talk […] as useful.” Cindy now realizes “there was a whole ton of stuff I should have said before to bring them along.”

Cindy’s current context is “very collaborative,” and the principal, “an old colleague,” is able to convey to teachers “the message that they should listen to me.” These structural supports give her the confidence to say, “So, it’s your classroom, but how about if I do this?” Most teachers are receptive, but they do not always understand her rationale, and they face perennial time constraints. Still, Cindy is grateful to have worked in environments that “aren’t super frustrating” and manages to stay optimistic, but when she looks back on the glory days of BTRS, she posits, “It was a better period. […] It seems like it was an easier time. Now it’s hard to get teachers […] to add another meeting. They don’t have time.” Not only that, but Cindy is quick to point out how “teaching is supposed to be full of such certainty, that to say, you know, ‘I can’t reach this kid’ or ‘I have no idea what he’s talking about’ or ‘I totally blew it here’” is deeply uncomfortable. By design, BTRS consisted of teachers from different schools because participants had to be vulnerable and stay “focused on admitting that something wasn’t working, […] and people felt like it might not be cool to do that with actual colleagues.”
Cindy reflects on that experience in her current work as a teacher educator. Pointing to a noticeable ebb in teacher research in the twenty-first century, she suggests, “It’s nice that they’re required in a whole range of programs, some sort of teacher research project, but [...] somehow, I don’t get the sense that it sticks.” In her own work as a teacher educator, Cindy constantly worries about “the young teachers” and “whether they’re going to be able to hang in there” when facing accountability pressures, challenging students, and even “incompetent principals.” Rather than just keeping them from quitting, she also strives to introduce them to teacher inquiry “partly to prevent them from going to graduate school” and leaving K-12 behind. Though Cindy realizes she is an anomaly, she is proud she returned to the classroom after earning her doctorate, even if she often omits those three magic letters after her name and insists, “Nobody calls me doctor.” She finds the degree sometimes “worries people,” and there is no guarantee of a pay bump.

It is clear, however, that Cindy is a scholar, even if some of her colleagues do not realize they are working alongside a published author and accomplished teacher researcher. She chuckles to recall “walking down the hall with this guy,” who unknowingly praised one of her articles. Though she finds it “gratifying” when colleagues recognize and read her work, she also strives to avoid “pulling rank.” Despite having “never really gotten any negative feedback,” she does not “put it out there very much,” at least not in her immediate sphere. It is a different story, she admits, “in front of teachers at other schools,” which she very much enjoys.

Continuing to write provides these opportunities, aside from just being fun: “I enjoy doing it because I love the kids, so my writing is not sterile. […] It is] full of my kids.”
Writing also gives Cindy a chance to show she “tremendously care[s] about the level of conversation that goes on in education. [...] It tends to be so poor that, you know, what are you going to do? You have to write.” When she peruses academic journals, she is drawn to “ethnographic stuff” that is “fun to read,” rather than “hardcore research,” such as “stuff about eye-tracking.” Regarding the latter, “That’s not a conversation teachers are going to mostly engage in” or “stuff that teachers would be interested in thinking about.” As an alternative, Cindy proposes exploring broader questions “about what kids do with books,” striving for “a conversation of value” comprised of insider accounts focusing less on “techniques” in favor of “the fundamental questions.”

It helps that Cindy finds those “fundamental questions” to be fun, too. Her lively classroom anecdotes sharply contrast her own anodyne childhood, as well as the rather “benign” school experiences of her son and daughter, who “survived well enough.” Through teacher research, Cindy works to ensure students thrive, but in all her years of teaching, she has come to understand what that requires: “a commitment to equity. [...] You certainly need that, but you also need teacher autonomy.” She feels fortunate to have worked in schools conducive to teacher research, “very progressive-type” places in which “the principal was not a boss, and the district left us alone.” When she considers the typical status quo, she is bothered by “the idea of teaching as a career where you’re supposed to be sure and it’s not ok to be really unsure,” which definitely “gets in the way of being able to really explore the different ideas that various kids bring.” Because she has largely avoided that milieu, Cindy’s “teaching is so different than it would have been.” Her “ability to hear is really, really different,” so she can “bring different kids’ ideas to the forefront, so kids who aren’t regarded as thinkers…I can see
those opportunities […] and those are powerful moments that I think can be quite transformative for kids.” Indeed, operating from an inquiry stance, Cindy thinks of herself as using “story as [a] weapon” to improve teaching and learning by “telling [teachers] stories about the kids that they don’t see.”

In the Age of Accountability, Cindy believes, “It’s almost impossible not to see deficits,” but her inquiry stance provides important perspective:

Certainly some kids don’t know some stuff, which they have to be taught, […] but now with this testing stuff, I just don’t think there’s any way to resist it unless you’ve got the kind of focus on places where kids take initiative, which is what I mean by the kind of discussion I try to do where kids say what’s on their mind and that can sort of shatter this view of kids being full of deficits.

When pressed to define inquiry as stance, the mindset that enables Cindy to push past deficit thinking even in a metrics-driven era, she cites Carini’s (2001) philosophy of persistent, faithful curiosity. Without a doubt, Cindy adheres to this motto. Although there was one year when she felt like “there was no inquiry in [her] teaching” because she “was just trying to hang in there” with new students and new content, she has never lost faith in her curiosity: “the stance is too integral.” She acknowledges how all too often, teachers lose either their curiosity or their faith in it, while she has maintained “because of the kids. […] It was just sort of in me. I mean, they are so curious, and I find them so interesting.” Buoyed by this eternal fascination, Cindy says, “The role talk plays in learning is […] the sea in which my research lives,” and she is remarkably content to just keep swimming.
CHAPTER 5
GAIL’S STORY

Though she claims to be an INFJ in the Myers-Briggs lexicon, Gail enters a conversation the way I imagine she enters a room—with a burst of positive energy and a smile palpable even over the phone. A self-labeled introvert, she notes how wrong it is to “assume that all teachers are extroverts,” but when talk turns to teacher research, Gail is undeniably gregarious and eager to share her experiences. She is “reflective by nature,” so practitioner inquiry suits her: “that’s sort of how I recharge, you know, just like pull into myself and think about the day and how things went.” Once recharged, she is clearly electrified and capable of igniting the spark in others.

That is precisely what Gail aims for as a consultant at “one of those at-risk [...] priority schools identified by the state.” Having launched her teaching career in the early ’90s, she officially retired in 2017, but currently coordinates with a former principal to enact “school-wide professional development that is inquiry-based.” As a teacher, Gail says, “you rise, and then you fall a little, and then you rise, and then you fall a little,” ultimately heading for “a happy ending,” though, “It’s not at the end yet.” Consulting gives her hope teacher inquiry “hasn’t completely died out,” when over the course of her career, she has witnessed a decline in district support for “the philosophy and the belief” of practitioner research. True to her positive nature, she focuses on “that little spark” she can enkindle, “happy to see a new generation keeping the inquiry fires burning.”

A Wandering Wonderer: The “Army Brat” Years

Gail identifies as “sort of a natural-born teacher,” though, like Cindy, she did not immediately hear or answer the call to the classroom, despite having indulged in many a childhood make-believe session wherein her three younger siblings were her pupils.
Using an authentic roll book and chalkboard, Gail taught them what she learned in school, maintaining verisimilitude. In retrospect, she realizes her mother, who supplied the props, must have sensed the intensity of her play and even the seeds of a future career. For their part, her siblings—and their stuffed animals—were “pretty cooperative.”

Born into a proud military family in the late 1950s, Gail was exposed to a wide array of educational settings. This “army brat” phase of her life “is an important part of [her] story,” undoubtedly nurturing her nascent inquiry stance. Of the various schools she attended, “some were good, and some were not,” a troubling reality she picked up on “even as a kid.” For instance, as a fourth grader in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, Gail had multiple opportunities for “interesting explorations.” She explains:

I don’t know if it was intentional, obviously, because I never had the opportunity to ask my teacher, but it was kind of open-ended differentiation. [...] You had this open-ended assignment and you could make of it what you would, and so I really ran with it and enjoyed that.

Memories like these, drawn from her “mind’s eye,” often incorporate her current professional knowledge: “differentiation” and other concepts resonate with who she is.

A bright, precocious child, Gail was also an avid reader, benefiting from a self-paced reading program in that same Kansas classroom. Gravitating to “the rose and silver level, which was the higher end,” she devoured stories, sometimes even moved to tears. Her parents, both “big readers,” reinforced these dispositions. Gail’s mother, who did not approve of television, was frequently “sitting on the sofa reading a book [...]”. That was just who she was. She was always reading.” Their impact is clear:

I’ve always been curious about why. I think I just came that way, and I had [...] well-educated parents who, when you asked them why, they wouldn’t push you off. They would explain or help me find out why, and so I was always supported in having that curiosity, and then that was the kind of parent I strove to be, and that was the kind of teacher that I strove to be.
The mini-research projects during Gail’s fourth-grade year fortified the habits cultivated at home, yet when the family moved to a New Orleans suburb, that harmony dissipated. Gail experienced “a very long bus ride” to attend “what had formerly been an all-black junior high” only to find there was no “new learning. It was almost like a repeat of what I’d already had.” Her sixth-grade teacher encouraged her to skip a grade, but her mother demanded he offer “enrichment and extra work.” Gail encountered a similar situation with the next move, to Ft. Hood, Texas, “in the middle of nowhere” and in the middle of her sixth-grade year. This presented the added obstacle of a seeming demotion back to elementary school, a decidedly “huge shift.” She began “wondering why” she did not seem to be learning anything new, thinking, “Isn’t it supposed to get harder?” Her teacher, a “wizened, elderly man,” who “basically just stood at the front” and “marched through the day” left her feeling school “was incredibly uninteresting.”

Fortunately, the peripatetic phase of Gail’s life came to an end with one last transition, to Northern Virginia, where she spent the entirety of her high school career—and, it turns out, her teaching career: “It was back then a good school district, and it still is a good school district.” Gail tempers that praise with her awareness of how zip codes dictate school quality: “I experienced that just from moving around, but in the Northern Virginia area, you really see it: […] high-end schools […] where the million-dollar homes are, and […] families that struggle all within the same school district.” From her vantage as a grandparent, she sees no sign this disparity is slowing or reversing: her grandson’s “nice, […] mostly white, middle-class elementary school,” the same one attended by his father, is “not as diverse as the schools that [she] taught in.” As a child, Gail did not have a full sense of the socioeconomic context, but she certainly detected “a difference
in quality in terms of the materials and the content.” As an adult, Gail is conscious of her “own little bubble” and how fortunate she was as a student.

Gail’s high school English teachers furthered her interest in books. Recalling specific units of study, she now understands how her teachers “used themes to unfold the curriculum,” deftly incorporating “required standards.” The school valued autonomy, inviting students to choose from an enticing menu of courses. Gail fondly remembers a Shakespeare mini-course: “I liked that teacher so well that once I had her, I always would pick her instead of the topic. […] She was very innovative and creative.” Gail also enjoyed learning from a bona fide poetess, “a very quirky […] hippie” with “super-long” hair and “fringy, loose-flowing caftan kind of clothes.” Years later, as an employee in the district, Gail encountered her former teacher “as a peer” and overcame her introversion to say hello: “She was very gracious.” She never got the chance to reconnect with her favorite English teacher, beloved not only by Gail but also her siblings and fittingly designated a Teacher of the Year. By the turn of the century, Gail herself would earn that accolade. When she noticed her role model’s name on the program, she thought, “I wish she were still alive because I would have loved to have said, ‘Look, I followed in your footsteps!’” For the time being, Gail’s teenage feet travelled a different path: towards a music career by way of an ROTC scholarship to Northwestern University.

A Curious Co-ed: The College Years

Going to college was more or less a forgone conclusion for Gail. Her mother, the daughter of a professor, attended college at 16. Her paternal grandfather was an Italian immigrant who worked in a steel mill and whose wife had an 8th-grade education. Gail treasures her father’s Depression-era memories of “going door to door with his father selling eggs,” recognizing how “for them, education was very important in a different
way […] because they, as a blue-collar family, worked so hard to make ends meet.”

Gail’s family made an indelible impression, such that she knew she wanted to attend college on a scholarship “to keep [her] parents from going into debt.”

Gail’s family values sometimes ran counter to the prevailing opinions at Northwestern, especially in regard to the Vietnam War. She describes this time period—the mid-1970s—as “the tail end of the anti-Vietnam era,” marked by “liberal disdain for the military,” which, in her case, manifested in the ROTC building’s intentionally off-campus location. Indeed, Gail “didn’t really advertise […] or brag about” her involvement with ROTC; her father had even been advised to wear civilian garb when stationed at the Pentagon. At the time, her “sorority sisters thought it was really weird […] to be affiliated with the military,” yet at a recent reunion, several of them, out of nowhere, expressed gratitude to Gail for her service. She claims this “never would have happened in those days,” when “you’d be more likely to be spit on.”

True to her inquiry stance, Gail saw this encounter as a “chance to kind of zoom out and see [herself] and [her] college friends from a different perspective.” Gail, having grown up “on posts and with liberal parents,” never fell prey to the specious logic that conflates being pro-military and being conservative. The end of the draft, she reasons, has a lot to do with how “times have changed and evolved and views of people in the military have changed.” One of her professors, “a strong advocate for an all-voluntary military,” opened her eyes to the significance of social class, framing the Kent State massacre as a confrontation between “middle-class draft dodgers versus lower-class draft dodgers,” which “really struck [her] and stuck with [her] all these years.”
Steeped in this climate, and having graduated high school at “the height of Watergate,” Gail developed a strong “fascination with all that that was unfolding,” prompting her to “major in history” on a presumed path to law school. Indeed, although Gail knew her ROTC scholarship was contingent on four years of service, she anticipated she could eventually “have the Marine Corps send [her] to law school,” nurturing a specific dream to attend the University of Virginia in pursuit of “a joint JD and masters in legal history.” Although this may not sound like the origin story of an elementary school teacher, it is definitely the tale of a politically aware intellectual.

As an undergraduate, Gail also had a strong interest in music, which would serve her well in her yet unknown future career. In fact, she had chosen Northwestern because of its music program, having flourished in high school band and private flute lessons, as well as spending summers “so immersed” at a prestigious music camp in Michigan. While her ability to fully immerse herself would eventually enhance her experiences with teacher research, Gail “never took a single music class” at Northwestern, in part because her sorority and her ROTC commitment occupied so much of her time. However, Gail had also realized “music was a difficult career and very cut-throat and sort of…one where there were divas and a lot of back-stabbing,” as well as “self-promotion.” Needless to say, Gail is “not that kind of person.”

The Call to the Classroom

Gail graduated from Northwestern and served in the Marine Corps, taking on a number of roles—“Adjutant, Personnel Officer, and Custodian of Classified Materials”—while stationed in California, “where [she] met and married [her] husband.” Being an officer “was an incredible experience in leadership and decision-making,” but Gail resigned in 1982 due pregnancy—“a for-real reason back in those days!” This also
proved to be a “for-real” turning point. Although Gail had “moved on” from playing school by her teens, when she watched her children “discover and learn about the world around them,” her “original path got reawakened.” While “volunteer[ing] in their preschools,” she noticed a “natural affinity between [her] and kids,” adding, “I just enjoy them so much, and they seem to enjoy me. There’s just this simpatico.”

She was “fortunate” to have been able to stay at home with her sons, but once they were both in K-12, she finally answered the call to the classroom: “It was kind of a convoluted pathway. […] I started out on the right path and then got sidetracked and then made my way back to […] the path I was destined to follow, which was teaching.” After a brief stint as a substitute, she took a job at her “neighborhood school […] as a kindergarten assistant” while working her way through a licensure program at George Mason. The lead teacher “was kind of old-school,” especially regarding “the need for teacher control,” but Gail appreciated her “wealth of knowledge about how children learn and just the whole idea of lots of experiences and centers for kids to explore.” This period of her life was an “apprenticeship,” rife with valuable lessons “about classroom community and management,” a strong foundation from which she could launch her career. She notes, “When I had my own classroom, I didn’t have the typical first-year teacher’s problems of management because I’d already been doing that for three years under the tutelage of a very experienced teacher.”

Becoming a full-fledged teacher took several years because Gail opted for a “flexible” route, maintaining full-time employment while completing coursework at night. She exudes gratitude for her support network:
I had this wonderful teacher that I was working with, and colleagues that were wonderful, and a principal, and my family, and friends, so supportive. [...] I had to do my courses at night, and they’d watch my kids for me.

Though Gail’s teacher education program served a number of career-changers, she was “on the older end,” and it certainly was not easy, especially when she encountered some bureaucratic red tape. The teacher with whom Gail worked “was flexible enough to switch places with [her] and let [her] do [her] student teaching in her classroom,” but the district insisted she resign for the duration of her internship. Gail tried to understand the “rule-following” nature of her superiors, but the program director intervened. She was a former school board member and had connections, and so she went over the person’s head to the deputy superintendent and convinced him to let me do it, and then she served as my university supervisor.

Channeling Paulo Coelho (1988), she chalks this experience up to yet another example of how “When you are on your path, the universe will conspire to help you.”

**An Introduction to Inquiry**

Among all of Gail’s cosmic conspirators, no one was quite as influential as Joan Isenberg, Gail’s “brilliant” advisor and an early childhood scholar whose “core belief [...] is the value of play in learning.” Gail claims, “Even though I’m retired and she’s retired, I still consider her my mentor.” Meeting Joan in 1991 supplied Gail with discipline-specific vocabulary to name her emerging insights. In contrast to her mentor teacher, Gail was much more open-ended and more facilitator than director of learning because of the influence of Joan and the classes I took from her, very much social constructivist, and providing [...] the space and the materials for kids to play and construct their own learning and then help them to make sense of that.

Reminiscent of how her mother offered young Gail the props to play teacher, Joan gave Gail exactly what she needed to flourish and grow, which, incidentally, was a deep understanding of the pedagogical value of play—for students and their teachers.
Gail credits Joan for her inquiry stance: “She’s the one who got me on the teacher researcher path.” In one of the first courses on the road to licensure, students read *Serious Players in the Primary Classroom* (Wassermann, 1990), which “advocated a framework of play, debrief, and replay.” Gail embraced this “fascinating” process:

You provide some interesting materials and see what the kids make of it, and then you have a conversation with them whereby the questions that you ask help them connect their different experiences with the materials, and then they replay and extend their learning based on the initial play and the insights developed in the debrief.

Using this framework, Joan asked students “to take an aspect of [their internship] classroom and infuse play into it.” Gail instantly thought of the classroom library, which, despite being “well-stocked,” never attracted the kids’ attention like the other centers. She “created the opportunity for a role” by experimenting with props and was astounded by how those “simple changes” resulted in “an incredibly popular center.”

This was, she recalls, her “very first toe in the water” of teacher research, “a tiny, little whet-your-appetite experience” because Joan wanted them to “keep it super manageable.” Still, the idea that “a tiny little change made such a powerful difference” had Gail “hooked,” giving rise to her educational philosophy: “If you can infuse play into a potentially not-that-interesting learning experience, then it will draw kids in, and they will benefit.” She beams, “That has kind of been my thing as a teacher, as a teacher leader, and even now as a consultant: the purpose and value of play in classrooms of all ages,” but especially kindergarten. She claims, “I’ve never given up on that, and I never will.” It is a core belief, in part, because of this inaugural experience.

Though Gail took to teacher research rather naturally, she did not immediately identify as a researcher. She believes she was researching “without the label,” taking
an inquiry stance because that was how I was prepared as a teacher, thanks to Joan. […] I had that, ‘Hmm. This is not quite right’ or ‘how could I do this better?’ and so I was always doing that naturally as a teacher.

Her inquiry stance is “so much a part of [her],” she catches herself generating field-notes while volunteering at her grandson’s school. When she was teaching, a student once sidled up next to her on the playground and asked why she was writing on her clipboard. Gail responded, “I’m making notes about what I see kids doing,” piquing the girl’s curiosity when “she found her name.” Thus, Gail’s stance is naturally visible.

Before her final interview, she prepared a set of categorized notes from the transcripts I had sent, eager to dive in and “relive all these happy memories.”

A Full-Fledged Teacher

Gail also dove into her first year of teaching, at the same school where she completed her internship. Mary Agnes Garman, who would become one of Gail’s most significant critical friends, hired her to teach first grade. Gail initially failed to realize what “an extraordinary community” it was, in the sense of “the teaching community,” as well as “the larger neighborhood,” yet she is grateful to have spent her first fifteen years as a teacher with Mary Agnes, who is “such a believer.” She adds,

She and I came the same year, and we left the same year, so I was fortunate to have an incredibly gifted woman as my principal. She was such a learner, and she encouraged all of us to be learners, and she […] had incredibly high standards, […] but she also had high standards for herself.

Mary Agnes “supported [her] on a positive pathway,” yet it is clear Gail exhibited agency along the way. When it was time for an evaluation, she handed her boss the book from Joan’s class, Serious Players in the Primary Classroom:

I can’t believe I did this, but I think this was the naïveté of the 1st-year teacher. I said, ‘You might want to read this book before you come to observe because then you’ll understand the framework of my classroom,’
but you know what? She read it, and she loved it, and she got a copy for every teacher in our building.

Though Gail “can’t imagine doing that with any of [her] subsequent principals,” working in this environment was a wonderful learning experience: “I had that wonderful, brilliant learner of a principal for 15 years. She’s just an amazing woman.” Gail cannot say enough about how “fortunate” she was to have started her career with an administrator who, “if I shared with her, ‘Here’s what I believe. Here’s what I’ve read, and here’s what I want to try,’ she would […] support me in doing it.”

As a teacher of record with a supportive administrator, Gail had “the freedom to do things” and could be “a lot more oriented to follow the children’s lead” than she had been as an intern. Her classroom, consequently, felt “more open and less teacher-directed and more teacher-facilitated,” but it resembled her mentor’s in at least one respect: she had multiple centers, including “a painting easel open every single day,” which “was unusual even then and is unheard of now.” The messiness was a small price to pay to give students a chance for free expression and play.

The openness and freedom in her centers also resounded through her willingness to entertain students’ questions, even those promising “to take you off on a tangent.” Whereas a typical teacher sometimes “shuts it down,” Gail respects and affirms students’ curiosity: “Two of [her] most favorite questions from students came up as tangential questions.” She always “freely admitted” her ignorance and encouraged exploration. In one instance, a child asked, “Which color holds the longest in a rainbow?” In another, while “learning about Antarctica,”

A child said, ‘Well, how did all that snow get there? If the sun causes weather, and there’s no sun there for six months, how did all that snow get there?’ And I was like, ‘Oh my gosh! I have no idea.’ […] He went home
and researched and came back with a printout of what he and his family had discovered. Gail welcomed these off-the-wall questions, in part, because her parents had never seemed annoyed by her curiosity. Instead, they encouraged her “to go to the library and look stuff up in the encyclopedia,” reinforcing her gut instinct: “that’s an important part of life, like, you want to wonder and ask why.” She simply “can’t remember not being that way,” and being an elementary school teacher gave her ample opportunity to exercise her own curiosity while cultivating the same trait in her students. She never felt constrained by the curriculum, noting “there was a lot of room for following students’ interests, and we taught very thematically, so there were a lot of connections between content areas, which mirrors more how the brain works.”

As Gail continued to learn and grow, “it was just a natural thing” to ask reflective questions along the way, from something seemingly innocuous—“Why is the classroom arranged this way?”—to more pressing matters, such as why some lessons seemed to fall flat. In those instances, she got to work “investigating and fixing it,” so her “inquiry stance really helped [her] notice the good things and continue with the good things and also to notice the things that weren’t working and to try to do something about them.” Gail instinctively developed a process for juggling multiple sources of inquiry, keeping salient questions on her “front burner,” which merited the “most attention and more intentionality in terms of data collection and reflections.” Gradually, she “learned to let [her]self go” rather than staying “focused on the topic at hand,” which allowed her to tend to “back-burner things,” where she could stumble upon “seeds for a future inquiry.”

True to the spirit of iterative inquiry, Gail often sets out with one question in mind before “veering into” a new and exciting cycle. Once, she wondered, “Could I use the
same books effectively with different levels of readers?” Working with the big book/little book sets provided for her science curriculum, she “quickly found out” how to differentiate for her learners. Her upper-grade colleagues had been concerned about juggling content instruction with guided reading, whereas Gail sought to “periodically infuse” one aim into the other. She explains, “I wanted to see could I use those books, which might be too difficult for beginning readers to follow independently, but with support they could follow it, and we could still have the content conversation.” Much to her delight, “that worked pretty well,” and having “proved to [herself] that it could be done,” she was able to share her findings in order to allay her colleagues’ fears.

The satisfaction of solving one dilemma did not stop Gail from inquiring. Rather, “that year, it was sort of two projects in one: my initial one, which I quickly found out the answer to,” and “a different avenue” of inquiry, discovered by “following the children’s lead.” She had noticed how “the kids would literally sit forever and have, like, grand conversations about the books we were reading,” and she was curious about how to “sustain” that from year to year. They were especially enthralled with Jan Brett books once they discovered the bonus stories in her borders: “I remember sitting there with them for 45 minutes one day, reading and talking about a Jan Brett book. Obviously that wasn’t the lesson plan,” but their natural curiosity prompted rich discussion about “author’s craft.” Their enthusiasm even attracted the librarian’s attention, prompting Gail to select “books that would lend themselves to […] grand discourse.” That year, she learned about “that give-and-take of wait for the students to notice it or point it out” and always appreciates how you can “use the knowledge gained from [previous studies] as the springboard for a new year.” Indeed, Gail lets the topics of prior inquiries “simmer,”
knowing she can “revisit those backburner pots if things aren’t going smoothly,” though, “for the most part, the knowledge gained is helpful going forward.”

In addition to distinguishing between front- and backburner ideas, over time, Gail has noticed questions fall into two categories: proactive and reactive inquiry. Joan, she recalls, “was a big believer in being proactive,” stressing how “in the early childhood world, [...] you want to anticipate and plan for positive experiences rather than waiting for something bad to happen.” For Gail, being reactive is not necessarily negative, but is more about “inquiry [as] a way of problem solving [...] in that I saw a problem, and I delved into why it was a problem and what I could do about it.” Being able to embrace and rectify a problem of practice requires agency, as well as an unwavering goal of “supporting student learning.” Situating teacher researchers alongside other professionals, Gail sees practitioner inquiry as a matter of getting better at what you do in support of your field, [...] like, say, in medicine, your patients, or in the social sciences, your clients. That you want to get better at what you do so you support them, and to me teacher research is about being better at teaching and learning so that students benefit.

Whether an inquiry project is proactive or reactive, or even a result of “ongoing curiosity,” student learning is the ultimate aim.

Connecting with Critical Friends

In the late ’90s, when a transition from straight-grade kindergarten to K-1 multi-age loomed large, Gail wondered about “actively investigating how [her] beliefs could be put into practice [...] in a different grade-level configuration.” She reached out to the district-level Teacher Researcher Network (TRN), led by one of the women she affectionately refers to as the district’s “Founding Mothers of teacher research.” They had acquired funding “way back in the ’80s” to develop a “framework” that became “a
very important support to teacher research” as they “spread it through the district.”

Initially, the network had seemed “peripheral” to Gail, especially when she was a pre-service teacher, yet she “had never experienced […] a full year’s worth of research like that because usually [her] courses were semester-long.” In addition, her early experiences had been much less formal:

I would think, ‘Hmm. Why is it so crowded over at the coat closet?’ […] I would rearrange and then study the difference and see if different patterns of arranging the classroom made a difference, so I was always doing that kind of thing, but this in-depth, year-long study […] was a new and exciting experience for me.

Thus, Gail evolved from full-fledged teacher to “full-fledged, genuine teacher researcher.” Collaborating with the network ensured Gail could maintain her deep commitment to play while adjusting to the challenge of a multi-age classroom.

The TRN’s “typical model was to have a school-based group with somebody at the school leading the group,” but this particular year witnessed a “cross-district group,” stimulating and supporting Gail’s inquiry stance through “cross-pollination” with a diverse group of peers. Gail tends to think “it’s more powerful when it’s on-site in your building because those are your colleagues, and you see them every day, so you get that in-between times contact as well,” but stepping outside of her school allowed Gail to freely consider how to approach the challenge of a shift to a multi-age classroom. Her colleagues, she recalls, “were very concerned” kindergarteners would experience less play in a K-1 environment, “which [Gail] thought was odd because [she] had taught first grade and had a very play-based classroom.” Stepping away from her colleagues and into the cross-district group reinforced her tendency to take “a proactive stance.”

Participating in the group also enabled Gail to see what leading teacher researchers looks like. A Founding Mother, as facilitator, was an excellent role model:
We would sit in her classroom, and we would arrange the desks in a circle. It was very important to her, [...] and I’ve come to understand why because then, you know, everybody’s equal. There’s no, like, front of the room or back of the room. No one has their back to anybody.

Gail appreciated experiencing the structured yet “low-key format,” which began with a “networking greeting” before “each person would talk about what they were finding and ask for assistance with any challenges that they were experiencing, and then the rest of the group would support them.” The “masterful facilitator” and her eager mentees reassured Gail she was “on [her] pathway.”

Gail launched into an “ambitious” study and “tried to keep track of everything that happened all day long” because she had “way too broad of a question”: how to keep play in a K-1 classroom. Describing this as her “first formal research study on [her] own,” she quickly catches herself: “not on [her] own.” Rather, this project “took such an interesting turn through the support of [her] teacher research group and following [her] students’ lead.” Prior to linking up with the TRN, Gail “followed [her] own whims [...] as a researcher,” so the group helped her “make some difficult decisions in order to make the study as meaningful as possible,” in part by making it more “manageable,” but also by “helping [her] notice” what was “unusual and worthy of notice and sharing.”

Striving to be a more disciplined inquirer, she opted to “focus just on one content area, the one that was the most surprising and unexpected in terms of what you would typically see in the classroom.” That turned out to be social studies, not a typical contender for “hands-on, minds-on” lessons, yet Gail discovered how her students “took social studies concepts and made them more play-like.” She noticed, for instance, after a Mount Vernon field trip, how they gravitated to a set of George and Martha
Washington paper dolls and created “little scenarios with them based on stuff that we had read about or learned about, which was very intriguing.”

That same year, as part of a “new curriculum expectation,” teachers had been asked to help students “create a timeline” by charting “important historical events.” In Gail’s playful classroom, the students were “so fascinated” that they urged her to put everything on it, [...] and you could tell that they didn’t quite understand about passage of time, but they would ask questions like, ‘Who [...] discovered the pencil?’, [...] so we would look things up and then we would add them to the timeline, and on Presidents’ Day, we had to add every single president’s birthday on the timeline, so, you know, this thing that was supposed to have maybe ten events on it ended up spanning three walls of our classroom [...] starting with the dinosaurs and going all the way around to the kids’ birthdays.

This playful—and productive—process brought humor to the classroom when students became interested in the moon landing. Gail can “remember that vividly,” having been 12 at the time, “watching on television.” She turned to her intern and asked, “How old were you?” only to discover she was “getting old” because the intern had not been born. That, too, “was a fascinating concept to the kids: [...] things happened before they were born.” What started as a simple way to meet a standard, because of Gail’s natural curiosity and openness to the curiosity of others, ultimately surfaced deep lessons about history: students came to understand “what history actually is and how it’s constantly being made, like everything that occurs now, once it becomes something that’s already happened, [...] it’s history.” When she thinks about how “that was just a fascinating concept that [they] played around with all year,” she recognizes the TRN group’s vital role: “helping [her] focus” in order to notice that “play in that area wasn’t something that you naturally see like you would with other disciplines.”
In addition to supporting inquiry projects, the TRN held an annual conference. Attending as a fully licensed teacher, "doing research because [she] believed in it, not because it was required of a class, [...] was very empowering." Gail “got hooked on this conference” because “you could find out all these cool things that people did in their classrooms.” Although she was “terrified” by the prospect of presenting to adults, the network encouraged “different ways of sharing.” The roundtable format was “a safe toe-in” because “it’s basically like a dining room table conversation,” a natural extension of her tendency to reach out to “a partner teacher to talk things over with and try things out across our classrooms.” Over time, she “got more comfortable” sharing her work, whether co-presenting, leading a workshop, or eventually, daring to deliver the conference keynote. She remembers being “pretty nervous” but ultimately “had so much fun with the creative piece of it.” The natural-born teacher who became a natural-born teacher researcher was on her way to being a natural-born teacher leader.

A Researcher on the Rise

Gail’s growth attracted district recognition when she was named Teacher of the Year for 2000-2001. She attributes the honor to a “perfect storm” of criteria. She “had just achieved National Board Certification,” among the first teachers in the district to do so. Gail acknowledges Joan’s role in that step: “I’d heard of National Board Certification, and I was kind of interested in it, but I didn’t go for it until she told me I should,” insisting it would “open doors.” Her superintendent, she recalls, “was a big believer in National Board Certification,” and he was also a proponent of multi-age classrooms. Thus, Gail’s experience “piloting K-1” was another strength of her portfolio, but perhaps the most salient component was the testimony of a parent:
I had her third child in my multi-age. I’d had [...] her other two sons previously for straight-grade kindergarten, [...] and this mom included in her letter about how her older son cried when it was a snow day because he wanted to go to school.

Gail credits “all those pieces coming together” as the reason she was a finalist. She was pleasantly surprised when one of her interviewers was the same deputy superintendent who had once supported her by “bending the rules” for her student teaching placement.

Joan was right: “that platform opened a lot of doors” because “becoming Teacher of the Year and also being National Board Certified gave [her] a big voice.” Fielding requests to serve on committees or work on various curriculum projects, Gail embraced “opportunities for good,” endeavoring “to advance the philosophy of inquiry-based practice and being reflective and supporting student learning through knowing your students well.” Establishing a teacher research group at her school was one means to that end. Gail had enjoyed the TRN group, but “didn’t know how to lead one.” When the TRN co-leader offered to mentor her, she approached Mary Agnes, knowing “anything we learned and shared with her, she would run with” because she was “a learning principal, […] very inquiry-minded and all about learning and getting better at the craft of teaching.” Mary Agnes readily approved: “She let me leave for a half-day once a month and go over to another school and be part of the teacher researcher group.” As an apprentice, Gail got a feel for the “step-by-step” process guiding “the cycle of a year,” which was “a very gentle way to acquire the knowledge, […] instead of just being dumped in there and having to figure it out as the year unfolds, […] to get to experience it alongside somebody who knows what they’re doing.” Her mentor was “explicit about kind of showing and telling, […] so she was kind of unpacking her actions.”
This phase of her career also included one of her most vexing problems of practice, prompting a more reactive-style teacher research project. She recognized, “The students and I didn’t like writing time, and so I thought, ‘Well, this can’t go on. I need to do something about it.’” She had come to appreciate the “lovely, almost family feel” of a multi-age classroom because the older students, well versed in procedures and expectations, could mentor their younger classmates. This year, however, writing was an unpleasant task for everyone and “a burdensome time of day.” Gail tinkered with the schedule, but then she told herself, “There must be something that I am doing in terms of organizing and instruction that’s not cutting it.” Gail’s willingness to take a critical view of herself catalyzed her decision to “embark” on a systematic study to resolve her classroom dilemma, going into “problem-solving mode” by reflecting, “I don’t like how this is going. Why is it going this way, and what can I do about it?”

She began by investigating “what quality writing and writing instruction is all about” according to “the greats,” who equipped her with specific ideas to implement in her classroom. For example, “following Ralph Fletcher’s lead, [...] we called what they wrote in their writer’s notebook.” However, “the real game-changer” was a workshop she attended on “whole-brain writing.” With multiple sources of help and the patience to see the process through, “by March, [writing] became such a lovely time of day. [...] It became a very reflective opportunity,” and “by the end of the year,” when the class was “getting ready to embark on writing time,” a student “spontaneously said, ‘I love writing,’ which you never would have heard earlier in the year from anybody.” Gail reinforced this attitude by embracing the idea of “a Lucy Calkins-style writers’ celebration,” in that
students were occasionally asked to “go through the writer’s notebook and get one of their drafts, and [they] would turn it into a published work.”

Cumulatively, these small adjustments had a powerful impact. Gail “really saw a big change for the positive because then they saw the purpose. The purpose for writing was to share with others your thinking or your ideas or your experiences.” Inspired by Mem Fox (1993), who advocated for “classroom communities […] in which writing matters because it’s done for real reasons by real writers who ache with caring for a real response” (p. 22), Gail did everything she could for her students to be purposeful writers. Acting “systematically,” she “tried out writing tables and then took notes about how that worked,” and she “tried out writing buddies and took notes about how that worked.” She admits “that doesn’t always happen with the typical teacher,” but for Gail, “the intentionality and the systematic nature really help you keep track of what’s effective and what isn’t.” Because this study was “much more involved,” she “took a lot of detailed notes,” so it “was sort of the other end of the spectrum, much more official” than her initial experiences with teacher research. In fact, this experience made her feel like a “formal” researcher, on par with the university level.

Gail’s intern at the time hailed this as “the best experience of her teaching life so far because every child had a piece that they shared.” One student's “incredibly creative” story spanned an impressive 15 pages. Gail treasures her copy, as well as a subsequent story the girl wrote in middle school:

On the dedication page, she wrote, ‘To Ms. Ritchie, who taught me to write,’ […] and that was so special to me. […] I had initially struggled with writing instruction, and that meant so much that I’d had such a positive impact on her life.
In the midst of teacher research, “even things like that I keep track of as evidence that this is working.” That, in turn, informs her future plans. She loves how when “something isn’t going well,” being willing to “invest the time and energy into investigating it” means you “start the following year basing the beginning of your instruction on all the things you learned the year before.” Indeed, Gail “never had huge issues with writing again,” thanks to insights she gleaned “from the experts and from [her] students.”

Making demonstrable progress as a teacher researcher, Gail felt “ready to […] have a go with facilitating” by launching a teacher research group at her school. Across the district, “leaders went once a month for networking and ongoing professional learning,” and “through the 2000s,” teacher researchers and group leaders enjoyed robust funding, although that is no longer the case. In addition to offering stipends for group leaders, the district also provided “paid release time” and substitutes “for teacher researchers to meet during school hours.” She explains,

> It was lovely because they funded 3 days per researcher, so most groups would break that into 6 half days, and that would carry you pretty much through the research year, and once that funding disappeared, then some principals believed in it strongly enough to continue it and fund it on their own, and some groups met, you know, after hours, but […] there are very few who are still doing it the way we did it back in the glory days.

Having come of age as a teacher researcher at just the right moment, Gail consistently appreciates how “very fortunate” she has been.

Feeling supported encourages Gail to engage in proactive inquiry any time “something new is coming.” For example, “if there’s new curriculum on the horizon,” Gail tries “to figure out how to unfold it with students.” When she and a colleague anticipated having “to frame [their] math instruction through a workshop format,” rather than dread the inevitable or criticize the unknown, they took an inquiry stance:
We decided that we would have a go with it ourselves before we were required to use some kind of framework. We thought we would try things out and see what worked for us so that we would have a better sense of what worked and what didn’t work when the required stuff got imposed.

This two-year study incorporated “harder, […] more quantitative data” from individual pre- and post-assessments. In addition, they enlisted an early childhood scholar as a co-researcher, enjoying the “praxis” from this “partnership between reality and theory.”

Gail feels proudly nostalgic to consider how she “was researching that in 2003 and 2004,” and now, as a consultant, she is “supporting other teachers in implementing it” because the workshop format is “a lot more commonplace.” She has evolved into a teacher leader, mentoring because she, too, was mentored.

**Learning and Leading**

Joan, as Gail’s most prominent mentor, continued to provide guidance by chairing Gail’s doctoral committee. Gail had suspected she might “eventually go for a doctorate,” and that inkling increased after her stint as Teacher of the Year when she thought, “Now what do I do?” Joan encouraged Gail to consider a Ph.D. by pointing out how, like being board-certified, it would “open a lot of doors.” Gail adamantly believes, “Whenever there was a professional crossroads or a decision to be made, she always gave me such excellent advice. […] She has never steered me wrong.” Earning a doctorate also kept doors open. Gail had been working as an adjunct teacher educator since the late ’90s, but when an accreditation visit prompted stricter standards, “schools were really cracking down, and they wanted their adjunct faculty to have doctorates.”

Aside from the tangible benefit, going back to school deepened Gail’s appreciation for teacher inquiry. She saw clear parallels to “university-level qualitative research,” with the key difference being her “insider stance.” Indeed, she proudly
considers herself “a qualitative researcher because, you know, it’s the stories of what worked and how and why it worked that are helpful.” As she honed her investigative skills, she was nurtured by professors “in [Joan’s] orbit,” who saw “the value of teachers being researchers.” Their scholarly guidance infused her natural habit of “wondering why this works or why this doesn’t work or what makes this person tick or […] why is that gelling or not gelling?” Encountering the work of Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014), for example, she noticed how the “passions” they articulate as possible inspirations for practitioner researchers seamlessly correspond with her proactive/reactive categories. In Gail’s experience, it usually comes down to:

There’s something about my classroom I don’t like or that’s puzzling me, and I want to investigate it, so I can quote-fix-unquote it…or there’s new curriculum, and I want to understand it, so that I can unfold it in the best way for my students.

Graduate school thus affirmed her habit of “noticing what’s going on in the classroom” and her use of “conceptual headers.”

As a student teacher, Gail had benefited from the Professional Development School (PDS) model at George Mason. As a cooperating teacher and emerging scholar, Gail played an important role in the PDS, inquiring with and alongside interns: “They could become co-researchers and help with data collection or […] just by virtue of the conversations we had, develop an inquiry stance of their own.” The George Mason model experienced “a game-changer” after hearing about the Penn State-State College partnership: “It was just so impressive,” because “they were very conscious about instilling an inquiry stance.” Inspired by “the idea that new teachers were coming into the field already with an inquiry stance at the same time that veteran teachers were being given the opportunity to either revisit their roots or to develop an inquiry stance,”
the George Mason faculty decided “to include an inquiry project” in their capstone classes, so Gail, as an adjunct, got to work with pre-service teachers as “they embarked on a research project.” Acknowledging the challenges, Gail “tried to bring that more practical reality into it” by showing how what might seem like “additional work” is “actually going to help you be a better teacher, and […] you can do this along with the natural ebb and flow of your classroom.”

As Gail’s familiarity with and fervor for practitioner inquiry increased, she extended her involvement with the district’s Teacher Researcher Network by serving as co-leader, and she also joined the nationwide Teachers Network Policy Institute, later known as the Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI). TNLI had nationwide affiliates and held “an every-other-year conference, where people would gather from across the country and share their research.” She appreciated TNLI’s emphasis on “classroom-based research with policy implications, so the idea was you discover things in your classroom to inform policymakers […] so that the decisions that they’re making about policy would actually work in classrooms.” The “fabulous people” she met through the network were “super thoughtful and intelligent,” as well as “social-justice oriented.”

TNLI inspired Gail to join with colleagues as “co-researchers about professional learning communities.” Her principal had wondered “what would happen if we had everybody in the school inquire about something,” so Gail helped initiate school-wide “learning circles.” Teachers were asked “to identify a topic of interest to them, […] and then we grouped the teachers by topic, […] and we met once a month […] after school.” By design, “people who facilitated the groups were people who were experienced teacher researchers,” yet Gail “found out the hard way that just because somebody had
been a teacher researcher themselves didn’t mean that they were comfortable leading a group.” Reflecting on her own “pathway,” in which she had gradually assumed responsibility, she “thought that would naturally work” with her colleagues, yet some were “very uncomfortable trying to lead a group, and […] they just didn’t follow through because they weren’t invested in it.” She learned “not everybody views themselves through that lens, like they don’t have that burning desire that I have to inquire.” Although “it doesn’t mean they’re bad teachers,” she was disappointed they “didn’t participate wholeheartedly because they didn’t believe in the value of it as deeply.”

In hindsight, Gail recognizes how even in “a pretty high-flying school,” faculty chafed against being “made to do this rather than choosing to do it, even though they got to choose their own topic,” so in the end, “not everybody got out of it what we had hoped or put into it what we had hoped.” As a Ph.D. student, she drew on this experience while exploring “how people come to teacher research.” She reasons, “People who are least likely to stick with it are the ones who are made to do it when they don’t want to.” Gail has never had that problem, so she appreciated being able “to interact with teachers across the country […] and see how things unfolded in other areas,” through TNLI as well as “another network called the Teacher Leader Network” (TLN). Although Gail maintains she is no “life of the party with adults,” and has even “been known to go to a conference and not talk to anybody until somebody talks to [her] first,” these experiences clearly brought an erstwhile introvert out of her shell. She mourns the loss of TNLI, which “disbanded […] once the accountability movement really got underway,” discouraging “classroom-based research” in favor of prescriptions for how to “dump knowledge into kids’ heads to get good scores […] as opposed to
listening to us about the practices that would really increase student knowledge, which would probably result in higher scores.” Gail sees teacher research as conducive rather than antithetical to student achievement, and through TNLI and TLN, she connected with like-minded colleagues from coast to coast.

Gail’s TRN mentor also encouraged her to get involved with an international teacher research group that synced their meetings with those of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). These gatherings invigorated Gail’s doctoral work, as some of the people she encountered—from Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada—ultimately became her dissertation participants. One Canadian superintendent “required all her teachers to conduct research,” which was “a fascinating concept,” considering Gail’s whole-school learning circle experiment had taught her “Americans don’t like to be told what to do.” Gail brought this global perspective to her dissertation, which charted “teacher research in Canada” across “the eight passions” and confirmed her hunch about the main sources of inquiry “in the Accountability Era.”

Studying teacher research gave her a fuller understanding of her own “problem-solving stance,” sometimes inspired by “a student or students who are puzzling,” when she “can’t figure out what’s making them tick.” Approaching “behavioral issues” in this manner prompts her to ask, “What’s setting them off? […] How might I be proactive in addressing antecedents?” During her last year as a teacher, she had “four firstborn daughters,” all of whom “wanted to be the queen bee,” and “a fair number of kind of immature little boys” who were “really rambunctious.” The girls were “jostling for authority at the same time that the boys were pouncing on one another.” She wanted to “support them in developing behaviors that would be more compatible with school
without breaking their spirits. […] I didn’t want to turn the boys into automatons, and neither did I want to squelch any leadership qualities in the girls.” Gail enlisted her students as “co-investigators,” inviting them to “look specifically at their own individual actions” on film: “They were much tougher on themselves than I would have been. It was fascinating to see how they delighted in tallying every little thing that they thought they did that was not aligned with school expectations.” Gail dislikes behaviorism, “rewards and consequences and that stuff,” but this class had been primed for it:

I would keep a class list […] on a clipboard, and if I noticed something that I wanted to make note of, I would pick up the clipboard and write it. […] That year, as soon as the students saw me reaching for the clipboard, silence. […] It was like Pavlov and his dogs. It was freaky, and I pointed it out to them, but that didn’t stop them from doing it.

Gail would rather avoid “controlling people that way,” preferring to have conversations with students and guiding them to take notice and control of their own behaviors.

Throughout her career in the classroom, Gail, too, took notice and control of her behaviors. As a dedicated teacher researcher, she always took “a lot of anecdotal notes,” designating a space for observations as well as reflections. She explains,

Periodically I would go back through and re-read my observations and my reflections, and an interesting thing that I discovered was […] when you come to your own writing as a reader, you’re coming from a different space, and you see things you didn’t notice the first time around.

Gail’s willingness to position herself as a learner and her acknowledgement that “sometimes you lose track of things” when you get “caught up in classroom life” have contributed to her longevity as a teacher researcher. Indeed, though Gail is no longer a teacher of record, she has not stopped learning or leading.
A New Niche for a Humble Hero

Gail thrived as a doctoral student, “dwelling in it and just immersing [herself…] and trying to make sense” of how to spread and sustain teacher research. She learned, “if you have a supportive framework, people are more likely to stick with it,” which had certainly been true in her experience. Developing within a scholarly community made her feel she was “standing on the shoulders of giants,” and even today, she relishes “ongoing learning and reading” as a way of “keeping up with the field.” She consistently embraces multiple perspectives, or as she describes it, “having [her] finger in multiple pies.” Staying grounded in her teaching job while working at the university level, in addition to maintaining ties with “brilliant teachers from around the country,” such as those in TNLI who were focused on the “policy level,” proved to be “a big help.”

Not one to separate theory and practice, Gail had “a great opportunity” to put her new knowledge to work when the last leg of her Ph.D. journey coincided with a shift to the central office in 2005 and her term as TRN co-leader. As “a networked thinker,” Gail has “noticed along the way […] how connections arise, […] like they’re meant to be.” She has always believed, “I’m on my path, and so the universe is conspiring to make those connections for me, […] as long as I stay open to that.” During this phase of her life, connections were particularly salient, such as when she discovered Frances Rust, whom she had encountered via TNLI, was “a long-time friend of Joan Isenberg’s.” Consequently, “Frances flew down from New York to attend [Gail’s] dissertation defense at Joan’s invitation.” Both scholars made invaluable contributions to Gail’s “development as a teacher and then as a teacher researcher.”

In another twist of fate, at the district office, Gail worked for Sylvia Auton, who, “way back,” when Gail’s student teaching placement hit a bureaucratic bump, “was the
person that we put the request to, and she said no, and then the director of teacher education went over her head.” Gail now saw Sylvia as “a huge proponent of teacher leadership,” understanding how back then, “she was basically just following the rules.” Sylvia’s support manifested in the funding she acquired “for National Board candidacy and for the Teacher Researcher Network to keep going when they didn’t have grants anymore,” yet Gail admits, “when she retired is when the air started going out of the balloon,” because Sylvia’s replacement “was not a believer. She had other priorities.”

Gail did her part to maintain the TRN. Even when the time came to pass the torch, it kept “running a little while,” but was ultimately stymied by financial obstacles as well as new personnel “who were not familiar with the history of this network, and so it wasn’t a priority for them.” By Gail’s estimate, the TRN “kind of peaked in 2007-2008 in terms of support, […] and with the recession of 2008 and budgets being cut, eventually there were no district-level monies at all for teacher research.” For awhile,

A classroom teacher who had been a researcher was still kind of keeping the network going, and when she left the district, that knowledge went with her, and the person who took over the annual conference, which was the final vestige of any kind of support, had never been a researcher. That lack of experience meant the person responsible for the TRN “was basically putting together a conference […] because she was required to, not because she believed in the value of teachers sharing their knowledge with one another.” Over time, even that faded away, so “in terms of district-wide support for it, it’s gone,” save for the occasional school-based “book studies” and other “little pockets” of inquiry.

Gail nurtured such ground-level efforts when, about a decade ago, she left central office to become a K-6 instructional coach. No longer a novice, Gail was “a lot more comfortable sharing with groups large and small.” Working as a coach also helped
her think about “inquiry as professional learning,” prompting her to imagine, “If I were a superintendent, that would be the basis of my teacher evaluation system.” She feels this is “an untapped avenue for teacher research,” having once participated in a cross-district group that “took our teacher evaluation goals and turned them into research questions and investigated them.” Further, she sees “school improvement” and “teacher evaluation goals” as inherently “interconnected,” as well as naturally suited for inquiry, yet because of “district politics,” she “was never in a powerful enough position to make that happen.” Still, spending ten years as a coach reinforced her status as an “instructional leader” or “a liaison between administration and teachers.” Sensitive to how principals have “so much bureaucratic stuff they have to do,” Gail enjoys bridging divides, especially when the “administration wants [her] there and values [her] support.”

Returning to a school setting and feeling out a new role also raised the question of whether or not Gail’s colleagues and students would refer to her as “Dr.” She advised them, “call me whatever you’re most comfortable with.” At the first school she served, “most people called [her] ‘Ms.,’” whereas when she transitioned to a Title I school six years later, she discovered, “They were very formal. They called each other Mr. and Mrs., and […] they all called me ‘Dr.’” This was definitely an adjustment, since Gail has long been hesitant to draw attention to her expertise. She notes, “I call myself a teacher leader now from a safe distance and in retrospect, but [initially] I was not comfortable with that label.” Viewing teaching as “an egalitarian profession,” she argues, “You don’t want to puff yourself up too much and have people think of you as, like, ‘who does she think she is?’” Because she “never held a doctorate as a classroom teacher,” she did
not have to worry about “lording it over people,” and even as a group leader, she had been “really careful not to puff [herself] up.”

Interpersonal relations are always a delicate balance, and Gail has run into minor and major obstacles over the years. A proud “Vygotskyan,” she once had a colleague say, “That makes sense for reading, but that doesn’t work for math.” Taking that in stride, Gail reminded herself, “You can go head-to-head with somebody like that, […] or you can support them in doing some research and learning it for themselves.” That magnanimity is not always possible, such as when a change in district leadership prompted an exodus of “people who […] wanted to bring other perspectives to the table” and a surplus of “people who are several levels above their Peter-Principle level, the Peter Principle being that you rise to the level of your incompetence.” In more recent years, Gail experienced a deeply personal affront when she and a new administrator did not see eye-to-eye. She told herself, “I could fight, and I’d probably win, but why would I want to work for somebody like that?” Still, it was hard to leave a school where she had “worked so hard” and was “looking forward to a final year of […] tying things up in a neat, tidy bow,” in accordance with her “vision” for her “story.” Because “per-se-ver-ance and per-sev-er-ance” go hand-in-hand, Gail sometimes wonders, “When does it make sense to let go, and when do I need to persevere?”

Feeling more than a bit “shaken,” Gail turned to dependable “allies,” starting with Mary Agnes, who reassured her and set her “on the path” toward “positive actions.” Next, Gail contacted a principal who had been a colleague at the central office and “had a vacancy at her school.” Though Gail still had to navigate several weeks of “ridiculous bureaucracy” to get there, she “ended up in such a happier place with wonderful
colleagues and a principal who believed in [her] and saw [her] as a leader,” much like Mary Agnes. Likewise, Gail’s new principal “believes in action research” and intentionally hires teachers with an “inquiry mindset.” This enabled Gail to finish out her career “on a very high note,” among “like-minded colleagues and a supportive principal.”

When Gail retired in 2017, her transition from coach to consultant provided a renewed sense of purpose. Citing The Life Cycle of the Career Teacher (Steffy et al., 2000), which she read at the urging of a TLN acquaintance, Gail celebrates the “different levels at different points in [her] career.” As a proud “emeritus,” she can “take all [her] years of experience and use it for good,” embracing the title of “teacher leader” because she senses “people look to [her] for expertise.” Going by “Dr.” also feels a little more “appropriate,” and “it just kind of bubbled up naturally.” Her passion for practitioner inquiry is likewise effervescent, and in her new position, she guides teachers “in casting questions and figuring out what data to collect,” living her dream of merging teacher research with professional development. Though she is “hopeful” for this initiative, she is also “careful not to get too excited about it,” having learned from experience: “when you force people to do something they don’t want to do, it doesn’t go well.” Rather than rush to “scale it,” she is “thankful” inquiry “hasn’t completely died out” and content “to continue learning” alongside “teachers who [are] also learners.”

A Reflective Retiree

Gail once gave a speech in which she likened action research to the archetypical hero’s journey, and she envisions her professional journey “as a teacher and a teacher researcher kind of along those lines.” She explains, “As egotistical as this might sound, I see myself as the hero in the journey,” though she is quick to credit the “allies […] along the way,” especially in recent years: “I’ve been on the rise after having a fall.” Knowing
all too well “the hero’s journey does not run smooth,” Gail tries to appreciate the
“comedic aspects” that punctuate the more “dramatic” phases, preferring not “to dwell in
too much negativity” because her story is “an unfinished journey at this point.”

Even as a retiree, Gail feels compelled to consider “the monsters and the
dragons” lurking in the Age of Accountability, including “education policies that don’t align with beneficial teaching and learning.” While the expectation of being “accountable for achieving the goals […] of your curriculum” is reasonable, the “overemphasis” on test scores “has been a source of conflict.” Gail sees No Child Left Behind as “the biggest change that happened over [her] career” because the “yearly testing” it spawned created a “domino effect of standards becoming more rigorous so that kids could be tested against those more rigorous standards.” Her district added a department to “shore up […] instruction so that students would do well on the test,” but she suspects their “main care” is “high scores,” rather than authentic learning. All too often, this means “one subject at a time, kind of trying to dump knowledge into kids’ heads, which is contrary to what we know about how the brain learns.” Gail worries about “people in the trenches who do understand how people learn but are being forced to act in ways that are contrary to their beliefs and knowledge systems.”

Gail suspects high schools may have been the first to forgo “interesting stuff” when “standardized testing became such an important part of education in our country,” and she is “fortunate” to have been somewhat insulated from testing for most of her career, “even when the accountability movement came in.” Now, she admits, “it’s different,” threatening “the open, creative, play-based kindergarten” at the core of her
teaching philosophy. As a consultant as well as a grandparent, she has witnessed “a lot of sitting at tables and doing work,” as well as a proliferation of “time-consuming” tests:

They plug the kids into a computer, and it assesses them in reading and math, and they have to do it 3 times a year in all grades, and then they make instructional decisions based on where kids are as assessed by computer. As a teacher that would have bothered me because I did my own one-on-one assessments with my students. […] You have to know your learners in order to plan and provide the experiences for them.

Gail doubts a computer can determine “what a student knows and can do rather than you actually sitting with the student and seeing personally what the kid can do.” Relying “on a machine instead of a knowledgeable professional” is “troubling,” and in “a position of authority, [she] would advocate for some action research around that.” She claims,

If I were the Secretary of Education, I definitely would be approaching it very differently than the current one. […] I would definitely promote an inquiry-based, introspective, ongoing, always curious approach to teaching and learning, and I think researching one’s own practice is an integral part of that.

The “open-ended and differentiated” ideal takes “a lot of extra work” when teachers “have enough on their plates as it is,” hence technology’s appeal. However, there are drawbacks, such as how “automated” report card comments prevent inquiry-oriented teachers from sharing vivid quotes gathered in the course of data collection.

That attention to detail was worth the time it took, whereas a spate of “paperwork and […] screenings and things” likely exacerbates teachers’ “frustration with the system,” which, coupled with “the very low pay,” explains attrition rates and recruitment struggles, especially in such a “high cost of living area.” Gail worries about efforts “to chip away at” teachers’ pensions, as well as the skyrocketing cost of college, “creating an even larger gap between the have and have-nots.” Of the “many things negatively impacting education right now,” money is a major factor because “the people who can
afford it get more educated, and the people who can't afford it either go deep into debt or they don't get the education and then they become the uneducated underclass.”

In her more cynical moments, she suspects those in power support the status quo and even strategically “cut off money and resources to the public school system” to “discredit public schools and privatize education.” Vehemently anti-privatization, Gail wants to “see people have the opportunity to become educated and successful,” and believes “free public education” is the best means to that end: “a pathway to [...] achieving an adulthood that’s meaningful and fulfilling.” She recognizes, however, that as “an old liberal softy,” her perspective might “run contrary to prevailing beliefs in terms of who’s in power right now nationally” and does not hesitate to cast “people who are trying to undermine public education [...] so that they can make a lot of money” as the dangerous “monsters or the dragons” in her professional life story.

Gail clarifies that while she does not fully identify with either of the country’s dominant political parties, she is “definitely progressive and liberal in viewpoint,” which tends to influence her vote. For the time being, that means at the state level, as well as in Congress, her “representation is aligned with [her] thinking.” She suspects,

When they’re running for reelection, I will definitely campaign more publically and vigorously than I have in the past because I have the time to do that now that I’m not actively employed. [...] I would like to become more involved.

She considers herself politically active, but “not to the point of, like, marching in things,” although she has participated in “lobbying days” at the state and federal level and contributes to various causes through “retired educator groups.” She prefers to be “more locally active,” having “testified before the school board” and attended “town halls.” Indeed, Gail is especially concerned about the “decline” in her district, but
“hopeful that the new superintendent […] will be able to […] swing us back to our
previous level of wonderfulness,” away from things like “scripted reading.”

Because she is “introspective and curious by nature,” Gail has maintained a spirit
of inquiry even in retirement. She elaborates,

It’s my way of being, and so it was my way of being a teacher and will
probably always be my way of being. I even am that way as a volunteer,
and I’m definitely that way as a consultant […] and as a grandparent. […]
It’s just who I am.

Unabashedly “random” and “tangential,” Gail delights in going down “rabbit holes”
because “You never know everything. There’s always more to find out.” Moreover, “the
more you find out, the more questions you have.” As a lifelong learner, Gail would not
have it any other way.
Erik was recently driving along, listening to NPR, when a story about a school in Minnesota (Kamenetz, 2018a) piqued his interest. The reporter explained how “there weren’t a whole lot of success stories” out of Race to the Top, but this school improved “on a variety of measures”—such as “test scores, graduation, [and] attendance”—by adding a meeting for teachers “to talk about students and […] gather data on what they were seeing.” Their “deliberate conversations” sparked memories of Erik’s early experiences in the alternative high school where he started working in 1995. The small, collegial staff discussed students daily in an informal capacity and more officially on a weekly basis. Each cohort of about 15 students worked with a team of 4 teachers, progressing from one team to the next on the road to graduation:

We talked every day because we were in the same office every day. We had before-school time, middle of the day, and after-school time where we could talk. […] It was such a great way […] to reflect and to learn from each other and learn about the students that we had, and we became a real tight-knit group.

The radio segment made Erik nostalgic for those “rich conversations.” He noted, “That’s what we were doing, and we could have done it better.”

Erik is still in alternative education, but these days, collaboration feels a bit different, owing to some organizational changes, like the push to align with the “sister campus”—another alternative in the district. At the beginning of his career, being part of a team “was like, ‘I’m thinking of doing this. What do you think?’” Now, Erik teams “with somebody who’s on the other side of town. It’s not the same. […] Mostly it’s just figuring out where we’re going based on the curriculum.” Feeling a bit constrained by the directive “to mirror each other,” Erik prefers that to aligning with a mainstream teacher.
because “the way to succeed with students who haven’t had success in the traditional comprehensive high school is you’ve got to do things differently.”

Erik’s experiences in alternative education have taught him, “good teaching is good teaching, and good planning is good planning, but when a kid comes in and they don’t have a place to live, it doesn’t matter what your lesson plan is.” His students, who tend to be “low on the socioeconomic scale,” are often “living really transient lives” and “struggle with attendance.” In any school, Erik sees teaching as a charge to help students in academics and in life, and he champions the flexibility he and his colleagues can provide. He believes, “in an ideal world,” alternative education “wouldn’t exist” because “kids would get everything they need” in a traditional environment, the same sort of setting in which he—and, he suspects, most teachers—succeeded.

Though his students are “extremely credit-deficient,” Erik consistently holds an asset view, insisting, “no matter where you are, you can improve. No matter what the score was on that one test, you can improve it.” Describing “some really, really talented […] kids with some special, special talents,” he understands how they simply got off track for graduation. They need something a little different. They want to make a change. […] If they’re lacking certain skills, the reason usually is […] the big high school […] just didn’t work for them. […] It’s not for everybody.

Erik’s inquiry stance helps him attend to each student “as an individual learner” to “figure out how” he can help them succeed. This “very, very individualized” approach, embodying “a philosophy of ‘we’re not going to slow things down. We’re not going to sit here and drill and kill. We’re going to challenge you,’” has been incredibly rewarding, prompting Erik to see his students as the heroes in his professional story. Admitting he might “sound like the sappy teacher,” he relishes working with them “at the end of their
high school years,” so as to have “the privilege of watching them […] walk across the stage and also come back and talk about […] what they’ve accomplished.” Erik is full of such fond memories, surprising himself with his ability to reminisce at length. He readily admits, “I’ve been teaching a long time,” and he has been inquiring all the while.

An Early Hankering for History

Erik grew up “near the Wisconsin-Minnesota border,” a few hours from Madison, where he has spent his entire teaching career. His “lower middle-class upbringing” was largely “uneventful,” and his parents “were pretty frugal,” but he had everything he needed, including “vacations in the car.” A “dutiful” K-12 student, who “always did well” and “got decent grades,” Erik never stood out as “a high flyer,” despite making honor roll and ensuring his parents were “happy when they’d come back from parent-teacher conferences.” Ironically, an elementary school survey predicted his career as a social studies teacher, but he did not see that as his future at the time. A few family members belonged to the field, including an uncle, who, when Erik “decided to become a teacher […] was really excited, but it was never really talked about before that.” While he was in high school, Erik’s mother “had become a nursing instructor […] at a tech school,” and his sister, then enrolled in the local college, “was on track to be a Spanish teacher.” Despite “that influence on education,” Erik did not feel a clear call to teaching.

Whereas some high school classmates were determined “to get to Harvard,” he admits, “Basketball and baseball […] were probably the main drive in going to school, so [he] could be at practice and participate in those things.” The lone academic exception was social studies, which Erik “always loved.” In fact, he “tried to take the history of Wisconsin three times in high school, and there were never enough students to offer it,” but he did enroll in AP history, a fortunate opportunity considering “there
weren’t many AP offerings at the time.” Undeterred by the rigor, he recalls, “I liked history. I didn’t mind writing. I loved reading stories. […] I loved history because there were stories that we could learn from.”

Erik often asks fellow teachers, “What’s one time from high school where you really remember learning something?” He has trouble choosing. In history, he “had to write an essay every week” and thus “really got into the habit of how to develop a good piece of writing.” His favorite teacher, however, taught two required courses, billed as the two most important classes you’ll take in high school because in Psychology, you’ll learn about people, how to get along with people, how to understand yourself. Econ. deals with money, how to manage your money, […] and if you can do those two things, you’ll probably have a pretty decent life.

In retrospect, Erik agrees. Psychology also fostered an interest in identity—“who you are, where you’re going, and what you need to get there”—that serves him well as an educator. Erik has endeavored to be like his teacher, who “was funny,” but also “made sense. He tried to […] connect to us as young people. […] He would challenge […] our thinking, and he was really cool.”

Though Erik is honest about his favorites, all of his teachers “were pretty good,” and he cannot recall any “huge discipline problems.” In hindsight, he suspects the school might have been “tracked pretty hard,” suggesting, “Big behavior issues […] were probably happening in another room.” Erik also wonders whether going to school with “the professors’ kids and the doctors’ kids and the lawyers’ kids” contributed to his school’s reputation as “the better” of the district’s two high schools. Within that community, “most of the kids [he] ran around with were decent students” who covered “a real wide spectrum,” whether they “barely graduated” or were “top of the class.”
Finding His Way

Unlike his classmates with Ivy League aspirations, Erik recalls, “It was pretty much assumed when I was in high school that I would go to the college that was in our hometown.” Guidance counselors never discussed the possibility of going elsewhere because “the thought […] wasn’t even really there.” Erik’s dad had been a high school dropout, and his mother was a nurse, so “it was assumed” he and his sister “would go to the state school that was in town because it was cheap and [they] could live at home.” Erik understood the expectation as a product of his family’s financial reality, as well as the value they placed on education. Even without “the experience of older siblings or parents that went off to college,” he knew higher education was important.

As an undergraduate at the local state college, Erik was a bit aimless, thinking, “I’ll give education a try.” Unlike Cindy and Gail, it appeared he was on a direct path to a teaching career, but the secondary education program was not a great fit. It felt “weird” to conduct observations at his former junior high school, and his education courses did not engage him like his history courses did: “I was really into history. I was really into the classes […], and I didn’t see […] that that was going to happen in that teacher ed. program. […] I just didn’t like the classes.” Erik suspects being in his hometown had something to do with it, in addition to the fact that his advisor belonged to the history department and picked up on Erik’s ambivalence, assuring him, “You don’t have to teach.” Thus, he set about earning a degree in history with a minor in Spanish.

After graduation, aimless once more, Erik asked himself, “Now what am I going to do?” The question nudged him forward, and he moved to Madison to be near friends. While “contemplating graduate school for history,” he took a job at the campus bookstore. Working full time and with benefits, he reasoned, would cover his bases
while he plotted his course. He was also able to “do a lot of reading on [his] own,” specifically “what [he] wanted to read, not what somebody was telling [him] to read.” It just so happened that he “stumbled across Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* and read that book a few times.” Kozol’s powerful ethnography on the brutal impact of socioeconomic disparities reignited Erik’s interest in a teaching career. He explains, “I still had this idea that, you know, I could be a teacher…that I’d like to teach.”

Erik scheduled a meeting with a professor in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was “a good talk,” in which Erik shared “the undergraduate research [he] had done on […] the history of African-Americans in Wisconsin, specifically on urban unrest in the ’60s.” When he expressed interest in being “a high school teacher, history teacher, something like that,” the professor “looked at [his] transcript, and she goes, […] ‘you’re pretty much there.’” After a subsequent meeting with “the head of the social studies education program,” Erik got the green light to *apply*, noting, “It was tough to get in. […] There were people that applied to the program and didn’t get in, but I did get in.”

**Teacher Education: Take Two**

After two years at the bookstore, Erik started his *second* secondary ed. program, and this time, it was “the opposite experience.” At 24, he “just saw the world differently” than he had five years prior. He felt “more aware” and “more ready to be a teacher,” which made him receptive to the theory-laden coursework. One class really stood out:

One of the first classes that I took down here was the history of education in America, taught by a professor who had been teaching it for decades and was retiring. I was the last class he ever had, and his final lecture […] pulled everything together. For him, it was pulling his career together.
Even now, Erik gets “excited about the history of the public school in America” and any opportunity to examine the fundamental purposes of education. It is little wonder a prolific scholar like Jurgen Herbst had such influence, and he challenged his students to consider, “Why are we educating people? Should we educate them to […] be cogs in the machine or should we educate them to break the machine?” That Herbst had spent a professional lifetime entertaining such questions seemed “pretty cool” to Erik.

In another class, called Writing across the Curriculum, Erik got a taste of action research when the professor shared a “social research project that she had done at a community center […], where she had students look at issues in their own community.” Erik, in turn, “talked with people […] in a tutoring program” where he worked and got a feel for interviewing, as well as “inquiry in education.” He describes the experience as “anthropological,” recalling how it “definitely impacted how [he] looked at teaching.” He was inspired, in his future classroom, to work towards “getting students interested in their community” so they understand “how they can be active citizens.”

Once Erik completed the requisite coursework, “when it came time to actually get out there and experience being in schools,” he felt drawn to the “options for students that weren’t fitting in the regular high school or traditional setting.” Erik had volunteered in various neighborhood centers, where he witnessed “the reality of a different educational system than the one [he] grew up in.” In contrast to his hometown, Madison, a “pretty progressive” environment, was also “more diverse” and had “bigger problems,” and Erik became really attuned to “kids that were […] struggling in the system” in a way that had escaped his notice as a high school student.
One of the alternative programs, Work and Learn, became Erik’s student
teaching placement. The program offered “a four-semester sequence of academics and
community-based placements” to help students obtain a diploma. When a lot of people
hear “credit recovery,” they tend to assume the students “just sit on computers,” but Erik
dismisses that misconception: though there is “an online option […] for a couple of
things, […] it’s still a classroom-driven community,” and “a big part of moving towards
graduation” necessitates “experiencing things outside of school.” Affirming that vision,
Erik was also attracted to the cohort model because “you’re working with just 15
students,” fostering a “real intense” relationship with all of them. He elaborates,

That’s who you were with for half the day, and that’s who you saw in the
afternoons when you went out into the community, and it’s just like […] a
tight family. You’re going to have issues. You’re going to get to know each
other so well that you’re going to butt heads, but you also share those big
successes.

Being able to teach “all subjects in kind of an interdisciplinary way,” as well as having
opportunities to “know the students outside of school” meant being able “to really teach
 […] the whole kid,” something that has come to define Erik’s teaching philosophy.

**Working and Learning**

After a successful student internship, Erik delighted to learn of “an opening at the
sister program,” also called Work and Learn, where he spent the first 21 years of his
career. He was especially grateful because “jobs were hard to come by” at the time,
with “massive amounts of applicants for one position.” During an interview at a middle
school, he found himself defending his student teaching placement when his résumé
prompted a question about “behavior issues.” He recalls, “I looked them all right in the
eye and I said, ‘You know, I don’t think I had a behavior issue the whole time I was
there.’” Owing to “the community that had been built by the teachers,” major disciplinary
conflict “really didn’t happen” at Work and Learn. Erik gladly accepted the job, and along with it, the challenge of dispelling misconceptions about his students. He explains, “A principal at the comprehensives can’t just say, ‘you have to take this kid. He’s blowing up our school.’ [...] Students have to want to be here, and sometimes they decide that this isn’t the place for them.” Erik knew Work and Learn was the place for him.

Erik really appreciated having been hired by a supportive principal who also happened to have been “part of the founders of the school.” He admires the origin story of alternative education, which arose in the ’60s, out of a [...] progressive education kind of philosophy. [...] The first alternative ed. program in Madison, City School, was basically taught by a bunch of hippies. [...] You look at their staff pictures from back then, and it’s what it was.

Erik’s colleagues “were veteran alternative ed. teachers,” who made him feel comfortable enough to teach outside of the box: “If I said, ‘Hey, students want to come in and ask some questions of your class, would you be willing to do this?’ They were all for it.” Still, he sometimes felt like a “lone wolf,” noting, “I was just starting out, [...] and everybody else was probably within five years of retirement.” Though his colleagues were unquestionably “supportive,” Erik, as “the young guy,” felt like he was more often “the guy trying a lot of new things.” The principal, however, encouraged Erik, suggesting the school needed “to change things up” in response to an evolving student population and offering Erik the freedom “to kind of figure out what that would look like.”

Erik thrived by being able “to try out a lot of things and [...] reflect on them,” developing habits that would make him an ideal teacher researcher. This felt far more authentic than discussions of reflective practice during his methods courses because “until you’ve been in a classroom and you’ve actually worked with students like that, you
don’t really know what reflection is.” Working with “seniors in their last semester of high school” also prompted him to support their reflective skills by planning the semester around a theme of identity: “who you are, where you’re going, what you believe in, what do you stand for,” and other “big questions,” such as “Why are people the way they are? Why am I the way I am? How do I learn best?” He challenged students to “come up with their own understanding,” so he “was constantly learning about [himself] and helping them learn about themselves.” This made Erik ripe for more formal practitioner inquiry.

**Taking Action**

As a “newer teacher,” Erik asked himself daily, “What the heck just happened? What could I have done better?” Though he has maintained this habit of informal inquiry, generally driven by “What happens when…?” questions, his inquiries became more systematic when he joined a district action research group after receiving an advertisement inviting him to “find out how [his] kids are learning” or “become better at something.” He was intrigued by the prospect of investigating whether or not what he was doing in class was working, and connecting with a formal group provided structure to his natural, ongoing wonderings.

Two “veteran” teacher researchers led the group, “the only one that was still open and had room.” It happened to have been focused on resiliency, a suitable topic for someone “working with kids at risk of not graduating.” Erik reasoned, “I could learn something a little bit more about the students who were in my classroom.” Only a few years into his career, he “had heard stories” and “talked to kids about things” far outside the realm of his own experience, and he knew his students had the “attributes of a resilient person.” The action research group, therefore, was a win-win: “I could learn a little bit about resiliency and then also learn a little bit more about my practice.”
Erik also learned about action research, like how “it took a couple months” to come up with a strong, incisive question. He credits the facilitators for their expertise:

They really let us struggle with what it is we were going to do. They didn’t want it to be a cookie-cutter approach to doing research. There were certain things they wanted us to do, and there were certain suggestions they would make, but they did kind of leave it up to us. They talked about different ways to gather data and you know, making sure you have multiple sources of data and stuff like that, so that was all there, but it was really up to us how to do it.

With a balance of autonomy and support, Erik “focused on the one thing in [his] job that [he] didn’t feel as confident in,” which was the vocational component of Work and Learn. His “lack of experience” as well as “just a curiosity as to what’s happening” prompted him to learn more. Students “were leaving school around noon,” and Erik wondered, “Is this worth it? […] What are students getting out of going off to these jobs?” He clarifies, “I knew it was good for them, but I was just asking well, how?” Ultimately, Erik “saw the need to […] understand why [his] students were spending part of the day outside of school” so that he might “bring that experience into the classroom” to “lend some value to it.” Connecting these aims to the theme of the group, he decided to explore how students were “building resiliency through these community-based placements.”

Initially, Erik admits, “I had no clue what I was doing […] or what I wanted to ask.” As he wrestled with the topic of resiliency as it related to his students, he bounced some ideas off of a kindergarten teacher who was familiar with Work and Learn. Some students had worked in her classroom, and she noticed “the little kids wouldn’t see them as dropouts,” but rather just “grown-ups,” asking Erik, “What do you think they get from being in the [kindergarten] classroom?” Because this “was the first time [he] did a project,” Erik had to learn how to narrow his question “so it was manageable, [and] so the data was collectable.” He adds, “I don’t think there was ever a time where I said, ‘I’m
going to come in and this is the question I’m going to ask.’ […] I always went through a series." Indeed, the steps of an inquiry project sometimes overlap or circle back: “There are times where I started seeing the results or looking at data that was coming in, and it was like, ‘Oh! I should be looking at this.’” Thus, because “data collection’s a big part of it,” Erik endeavors to make that part of the process a natural part of his practice:

You get feedback from students. […] There’s that essential question that you’re working through, and when you come to the end, the students have an exit slip, […] and you get to see what they took away from it. […] When I’m doing action research, I’m […] taking those replies and pulling them together and looking for […] themes, looking for […] maybe a hint as to where we go next.

Whenever possible, Erik collects “data” from students electronically, “so it’s easier for [him] to work with,” but the key is incorporating their feedback into a “more formal, more structured way” of developing as a teacher. Elevating everyday questions and practices to the level of a formal project primes Erik to think about how “the outcome is going to be something that I’m going to write up,” so he can be on the lookout for “take-aways.”

This is, understandably, a time-consuming process. His inaugural experience required him to occasionally leave his class with a sub, which was not ideal. However, he has since come to realize how valuable that time was, precisely because he was away from my students and sitting there with elementary school teachers and talking about a topic I didn’t know much about. […] There always has to be a first time where you really work through it, and because that was such a supportive environment, […] it just made it worthwhile.

Indeed, Erik hypothesizes, “If that had been a disaster,” his teacher research trajectory “probably would have taken a different shape.” Fortunately, he has been blessed with “supportive environments on every project.”

With a question in place, and encouragement from critical friends, Erik embraced the role of researcher, “being a little more methodical” during his daily dealings with
students. He interviewed them about their experiences and asked them to write journal entries on “what they liked about their jobs,” as well as “things they’d change.” He also intentionally collected data from community partners and supervisors by interviewing them or asking them to complete “little evaluations and check-ins.” In addition, Erik attempted to, “as much as possible, talk to the parents to see if they were noticing anything.” With all of that data coming in, he developed the habit of “keeping a journal,” consistently “sitting back after the day was done and just writing.” Cultivating this sort of inquiry stance, he believes, is “just better teaching” because “it just keeps you on your toes” to constantly ask yourself, “Why did I do that?” Erik firmly believes, “You’re able to make those instructional moves quicker and probably more accurately if you’re informed about why you made a move in the past.” Keeping a record preserved those insights.

Erik’s journaling is far less frequent these days, yet he “still jot[s] things down,” and he still has “a stack” of notebooks with “thoughts on what we did, why we did it, [and] what I could change.” That may explain why even though Erik’s first formal action research experience transpired 20 years ago, he can still “remember the people sitting around the table,” as well as speak knowledgably about his findings. The most important insight was how vital the role of the community mentor can be. He explains,

The adult knowing what our program’s about, knowing what the student needs, can provide a much better experience for that student on the job site, and [...] students definitely gain [...] social capital from being in the community. They [...] bring those things back into the classroom and build resiliency.

Erik is especially proud of one student, who shared how his vocational placement gave him “that on-the-square-type feeling.” For a student in an alternative school to gain access to Madison’s capitol square was a really powerful experience because
It’s the center of government. It’s white-collar. [...] People, on nice spring days, walk around the capitol and buy [...] lunch from food carts. [...] He goes, ‘That’s what I want,’ and this is a kid [...] who would rarely get up on the capitol, but he’s there because it’s his job, and that’s [...] the social capital that I saw.

The insights Erik gleaned from this project helped him “structure [his] class and [his] cohort [...] a lot more efficiently,” which, he believes, also reinforced the message to students that “this experience is there to benefit them.” Participating in the action research group was certainly beneficial to Erik, who had “learned how to be a good teacher researcher” and how action research projects could really inform his practice.

**Maintaining Momentum**

Erik carried that positive momentum into a subsequent project, designed with English Language Arts (ELA) standards in mind. Seniors were expected to complete “independent book projects,” and “were able to pick from a series of books,” as well as “a series of projects.” He noticed how “young women in class” were especially drawn to *Laughing in the Dark: From Colored Girl to Woman of Color—A Journey from Prison to Power* (Gaines, 1994). The author, Patrice Gaines, recounted her “experience of being a young person in the U.S.,” and Erik knew she worked for *The Washington Post*, among the “most important newspapers in the world.” This being the late ’90s, he decided to give students the option to e-mail the author, convinced “the novelty of that was enough to get a lot of students to participate.” He was curious about “implementing technology in the classroom,” and saw the added benefit that students would be “practicing their writing skills [and] communicating skills.”

This was early enough that “students in school didn’t have e-mail addresses,” so Erik served as middleman, relaying messages back and forth. As a teacher researcher, he interviewed both the students and their virtual pen pal. In addition, using the “tools”
he had gained from his action research group, he asked students to "fill out reflections before and after they wrote her," attempting to gauge how, if at all, their interactions impacted students' motivation as readers. Not only were they willing to read more, but they were also "willing to write more […] when they had that connection." He thus learned a "powerful" lesson about "authenticity in instruction" and the potential for "really cool outcomes" beyond the academic value. This activity proved to be "a self-esteem builder for students" and channeled their interest in relationships in a really positive way.

As with Erik's first project, he credits his fellow teacher researchers for "lots of support," especially in the form of "good questions, challenging [his] decisions" and "offering [him] suggestions." Both early action research experiences, he claims, became part of my core practice. […] It wasn't that I just did it as a research project, and then when it was done I threw it away. […] It really informed my practice and became part of the routines and procedures […] each semester and every year.

The connection with Patrice proved so fruitful that Erik "wrote a grant, […] so she came in and did a writing workshop for all of the students in the alternative programs," culminating in a student-generated anthology. Erik still corresponds with her, "and every once in a while, she'll ask, […] 'Do you still keep in touch with so-and-so?'" A study that came about pretty naturally for Erik because he "just wanted to see what happened," ultimately benefitted students across the district. Erik recognizes how the support of colleagues, administrators, and district leadership fostered the expansion of this project.

Erik derived so much value from watching his "kids getting connected" with an author that he was inspired to look for other opportunities for them "to interact with […] authors and meet them and realize that they're really cool people that care." When he assigned a book by Luis Rodriguez, he came up with "something new that [he] wanted
to try.” As with the prior project, he incorporated technology, asking students to write poems inspired by the author so he could “publish them online and share them with him.” Over time, Luis “ended up becoming a big part of [their] classroom,” even leading “whole-school functions,” so “other classrooms were able to benefit.” Erik’s colleagues, he recalls, were curious: “They’d ask me when did I find time to do that, and I’d say that I made it part of the class.” Though Erik “never did an action research project with a colleague,” they clearly witnessed his inquiry stance.

When subsequent students picked up Luis’s book, Erik could say, “He’s a friend of mine,” and even “pull out [his] phone and show them the texts.” These connections, such as his recent interactions with Kevin Powell of Real World fame, give him some cachet with students. The class had been reading The Education of Kevin Powell: A Boy’s Journey into Manhood (2015), and Erik knew the author had also interviewed “Michael B. Jordan from Black Panther, and I go, ‘I think we could talk to him,’ and they go, ‘Really?’ and I go, ‘Yeah,’ and I just pulled out my phone.” People from “the far corners of America” who were essentially able to “become members of [Erik’s] classroom” made an indelible impression on him and his students. He fondly remembers having fun “creating those learning experiences,” but these days, he would “have to really massage the benchmarks” to make that happen.

Indeed, it is worth reiterating how the project with Patrice was rooted in ELA standards. Though the Common Core era seems to have heightened their importance, Erik notes standards have “always been there. […] It was just how you went about meeting them.” In previous years, he felt comfortable “experimenting and trying new things” or “coming up with an idea and running with it,” knowing he would be expected
to account for his students’ learning. His current context feels “more centralized, you know: ‘Make sure you talk to this person first,’ […] so a lot of that […] running the trains on time […] kind of talk.” He elaborates on how teachers are being told:

   to look at this data or […] follow this […] way of teaching. […] There’s just a little more of that top-down stuff that I hadn’t experienced before. In the past, […] you were empowered, but you were also, you know, responsible, […] and you expect the same thing out of students. […] I liked that a little more, and that just may be a selfish type of thing: I don’t like being told what to do.

He hesitates to place the blame entirely on “the standards movement and Common Core,” though he insists a “diploma completion program” presents unique challenges that merit a nonstandard approach. Participating in action research groups made Erik feel “treated and trusted as a professional to make those calls.”

Broadening Horizons

When Erik felt “pretty solid” about teacher research, he opted to get a master’s at UW-Madison. Unapologetically glad for the “pay bump” resulting from an advanced degree, he is likewise transparent about his belief the experience would “make [him] a better teacher.” The lone master’s candidate in a seminar full of doctoral students, Erik initially experienced a flood of doubts, but he had returned to school just in time for the arrival of Diana Hess, a well-known scholar of social studies education who served as his advisor. Erik “really lucked out” to have met Diana, whose course on “classroom-based discussion” was intentionally practitioner focused: “A lot of grad classes met during the day, and if you’re a full-time teacher, you can’t take them. […] She made a point […] that she would do them after school, […] so that was just a blessing.”

In this welcoming environment, Diana “reinforced” Erik’s inquiry stance, modeling how to use “inquiry in the classroom […] at various levels.” He considers her a real hero
in his professional life story—“a fantastic, fantastic person [and] incredible teacher”—because of her ability to incorporate “methods in the college class the same way you could use them in a high school classroom.” Under her guidance, Erik began engaging in parallel and collaborative inquiry with his students, “teaching with and for inquiry.” She was an ideal person to “bounce ideas off” and offered “really good feedback.”

Diana invited Erik and other students to “become part of grants,” such as when he and a teacher from a neighboring district designed “historical inquiry” projects using newly digitized materials from the Library of Congress. The opportunity combined his love of history with his interest in technology, and they were able to attend a conference and “show some things that [they] had learned from implementing those tools.” As an alum, Erik has maintained a “connection to the university,” which he values for the opportunities that arise: “People have asked me, […] ‘would you be willing to talk with me about this? Could we observe one of your classes?’”

Diana, “now the dean of the School of Education,” remains a very important figure in Erik’s life, providing “opportunities to participate in other grants” or sit on “panels” and share his insights.

Diana, along with Ken Zeichner, assisted Erik with his thesis, which “took the form of action research” as he wondered, “What happens when students are engaged in […] discussion in the classroom? […] What do students […] like discussing in the classroom? What holds their attention?” He learned how to make instruction “relevant” by connecting to students’ experiences and incorporating “moral questions.” Writing a thesis also reinforced Erik’s tendency to position himself as a learner. Because he had to get institutional approval, his students were very aware he was working on a project for graduate school, and he would say to them, “One of the reasons that I’m having you
answer this question or one of the reasons I’m having you reflect on this is that I will be [...] looking at it to try to [...] improve my practice.” He always tries to send a clear message: “I’m here to learn, too. I want to be a better teacher. I value [...] your input. I value what you’re thinking and [...] open lines of communication.” Of his graduate school experience, Erik says without hesitation, “The main reason I went was to be a better teacher, and I know I became a better teacher. I just know it.”

Graduate school “kept [Erik] going with inquiry because [he] was able to [...] focus on [his] own practice as [he] was learning about different ways to be a teacher.” He brought that mindset to his biggest teacher research project, engaging his students as co-researchers in a study “of a problem that affects them.” Designed in the context of an existing “social issues unit,” the project “fit a lot of what was expected” in terms of state standards, yet it was the first time Erik attempted a whole-class inquiry. The students explored one set of research questions: “Why are students dropping out of high school [...] and specifically why are kids of color dropping out at a higher rate?”

Erik, acting as “kind of a facilitator” while simultaneously “researching their research,” wondered, “When students do these social issues projects [...] what’s actually happening as they’re going through that process, and what can we learn from it?” He is extremely proud of how his students “were taking an inquiry stance,” so what began as another “totally personal” project, for the sake of his own practice, morphed into a “major inquiry project” with the potential to become “something [...] some other young teacher or veteran teacher could use and learn from.”

Indeed, Erik shared this work at the district level and at a conference or two, but the project really took off when Erik’s action research group had the opportunity to
publish their stories in *Creating Equitable Classrooms through Action Research* (Caro-Bruce et al., 2007). This meant he “kept working with it, working with the data, [and] working with the findings,” so that project really “sticks with [him] the most.” He remembers having “a ton of support” during the data analysis phase, as well as “being interviewed […] to help write the introduction,” which, in turn, gave him additional perspective on his chapter. His students, understandably, “were excited when they found out […] it was going to be published and that their work would show up like that.”

Thinking about teacher research on a grander scale also brought the Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) to Erik’s attention. This “national network of action researchers” taught him “there were other people across the country doing this,” and their goal was to have what you’re doing, this action research, affect policy. […] We were doing that in Madison. We had our own network, and we would publish our findings, and people would look at them, but […] this was a different thing. This was trying to impact policy, so that was neat. […] I never really saw it as ‘Oh, I’m going to do this project so I can impact policy.’

Though that might not have been Erik’s initial goal, he began to understand the immense potential. Not only did his dropout project benefit his own students, who, having stayed in school, “felt good about themselves,” but Erik and his students also learned about the literal value of such research when their findings “matched what the school district had paid somebody to do.” Inspired by his wife, who was “a student in public policy” at the time, Erik explained to his students “how you could influence policymakers by writing up a short, little, like, memo almost,” which he offered as an option for their projects: “they liked it because it was one page.” Erik passed it on to the school board, and “the head assessment data guy from the district goes, ‘Wow, Erik. We spent 80 grand to find this out. You know, it’s kind of cool that your students did it.’”
Projects did not always go according to plan. Erik has “always taught in a pretty racially diverse classroom,” and he had noticed how “race always came up in class discussions,” though he “had heard […] teachers really shied away from” that topic. Intrigued, he designed a study around the question of how “students perceive and discuss issues of race.” At the time, he belonged to a group of “researchers who were looking at issues of equity and race,” and they had convinced him “That’d be a cool question to ask.” The elementary school teachers were especially interested because “They really didn’t have the opportunity to talk with their students about things in that light and have that kind of high-level engagement.” As a graduate student, Erik had learned that “when students have a voice in what they want to learn about and discuss, […] they’re more likely to become engaged in it and produce better work,” so he decided to “give it a shot and see what happens and see what students have to say.” However, Erik admits, “It wasn’t the best project,” perhaps because his interest in the topic might have exceeded that of his students. He tries not to feel too bad about the fact that “It just wasn’t the most exciting project,” yielding no sort of “big, flashy” insight.

In spite of the occasional setback, Erik credits robust district support, including a sustained connection with TNLI, for his momentum as a teacher researcher, citing “a push from our central office” for more reflective practice “as a way for teachers to stay fresh.” From his perspective, having a group of critical friends was key for a project to “lead to a final product,” so he “wasn’t working in isolation.” He thrived when he knew “there were other people who were doing research. We were talking about it. We were […] sharing our stories.” Even in the absence of collaborators, however, he would often “just do a little project” because of his habit of “reflective teaching,” telling himself,
I’m going to try this and see what happens. I’m going to look at the data and see what students think about it. Maybe I’ll run it by somebody, and if it works, I’ll keep it in. If it doesn’t, I’ll get rid of it.

Thus, even without a formal group in place, he felt comfortable enough to “just run it by a colleague in the office and see what they think.”

Interns also proved to be “a big help” during action research projects, offering “another way to gather information.” He elaborates: “It’s one more person you can talk to […] and share things […] with. […] You got somebody else in the classroom, and they can point out something” or ask insightful questions. Erik’s willingness to elicit “feedback” from mentees is consistent with his willingness to position himself as a learner. He sees tremendous value in multiple perspectives, and interns’ observations gave Erik a deeper understanding of his own practice while at the same time preparing his student teachers to launch their careers with an “inquiry mindset.”

**Inquiry of All Sorts**

Although Erik was trained with the lingo of action research, he grew fond of the term “inquiry” when Work and Learn became one of the first secondary schools connected with the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP). Erik’s “administrator […] wrote a grant,” and in time, they became an ASP “demonstration site.” The ASP model, which promoted “an inquiry process in school decision-making,” was basically “action research, only on a bigger level,” so it “meshed nicely with classroom inquiry.” Groups of teachers—or “cadres”—met to determine and examine their school’s “challenge areas.” Joining with cadres from other schools in the ASP network, they completed “an inquiry cycle,” but rather than “research and inquiry […] in the classroom,” it had more to do with “the big wheels that help keep the school running.” The core process was the same: “You look for possible solutions, you try something out, you reflect on it,” and
sometimes, “you see if you need to gather more information,” but ultimately, “you learn from whatever mistake you made or what went well” because you “discuss it with your teammates, and then you put together a plan.” The encouragement “to build inquiry into pretty much everything that we would do” appealed to Erik.

As part of the ASP network, Erik conducted a few “workshops at national conferences,” where he “would share action research projects” and talk about “using inquiry in the classroom.” As a conference attendee, he tended to “gravitate toward” sessions that enabled him to “see practice or hear somebody talk about their practice.” Thus, as a presenter, he jumped at any opportunity to present “something on inquiry,” sharing with his audience “things that [he] had tried in the classroom and had reflected on.” He always “talked them through […] why do action research,” as well as how to use “the cycle of inquiry […] to improve practice” by making instruction “authentic […] and learner-centered.” On one occasion, Erik advocated for the use of primary sources, having designed an activity using social network profiles for W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Groups of students grappled with the scholars’ competing ideas about African-American education, merging their own opinions with the historical perspectives. Erik explains, “Most of the documents I provided,” whereas the analysis “was more on them, so it was kind of a gradual release of responsibility with inquiry.” He presented this activity to illustrate how “using technology was kind of the hook.”

One of the activities he most enjoyed sharing he ironically considers a “missed opportunity” for action research: a decade-long series of “intergenerational dialogues” he calls the “Dialogue across the Ages.” Once a month, Erik travelled with “seniors that were at least a semester off-track” to the Madison Senior Center, where a range of
retirees interacted with them in a two-hour event akin to “speed-dating.” Broaching topics like “the role of family in society” or the “rights and responsibilities of citizenship” exercised students’ “discussion skills and communication skills,” and it was effectively “an extension of the project with Patrice,” in that Erik “noticed the students getting some really good advice from somebody that they really didn’t know.” Still, he refers to it as “the action research project I didn’t do,” regretting “things that I know I missed” and “things that I could have learned.” In particular, the interaction between “at-risk high school youth…kids that can look a little […] rough around the edges” and “retired attorneys and administrators” raised implications for “the public as a whole.” Whenever the senior citizens introduced themselves, Erik would ask, “Why are you here? Why’d you volunteer with this program?” Once, a woman admitted “she had no interaction with young people in her life, and […] what she knew was what she saw on TV, and the stories she saw on TV were not good.” Speaking with Erik’s students offered a more “authentic understanding of what young people were like in Madison,” helping to dispel some of the misconceptions that so often plague alternative education.

Indeed, when Erik attends conferences or summer programs, such as “NEH workshops, the Landmarks in American History workshops, and Gilder Lehrman seminars,” and says he works in alternative education, he gets an “automatic” reply:

‘What’s wrong with the students?’ […] They use better language than that: ‘What type of student goes to your program?’ So, I have to explain all that to them, […] and usually they say, ‘Oh yeah, we have one of those programs in our district, too,’ which I’m guessing is probably different than what we are.

He constantly battles the misconception that his students merit a “juvenile delinquent” label and suspects “it’s going to be hard for any alternative to shed that,” adding, “Do we have kids that are in trouble with the law? Yes, but there are kids that are in trouble with
the law at the comprehensives, too.” Equally prevalent—and pernicious—is assuming “they’re all special ed., they all have learning disabilities.” What he finds most troubling is when students internalize the message that “they’re all bad kids.” He has worked long enough to know that “changing the narrative on that takes time,” maintaining, “as long as we know who we are, […] then it’s not that big of a deal.”

The “Dialogue across the Ages” was one means to that end. At conferences, he would present “pictures of students engaging with the senior citizens” and invite attendees to “inquire and kind of analyze the photographs” as they contemplated “how you can take your learning outside of the classroom.” Local media also covered the program, which heightened Erik’s regret that he was not going through the “formal process of gathering [his] data.” He explains:

I just remember talking to […] this young reporter, […] and the amount of things that she noticed […] that’s where I just was kicking myself, you know, because there’s just so much here. It’s so rich. […] I got to walk around and observe, but […] I wasn’t taking notes. I was just listening.

Because Erik was not part of a group at the time, he “did not follow an action research protocol,” admitting, “you get a little lazy sometimes in your reflection.” He did, however, have “students reflect on it, and the senior citizen volunteers reflect on it,” but he stopped short of asking that crucial question: “What really happens here?” With a formal action research question, he would have “focused in on a specific aspect,” reasoning, “I could have learned more and then maybe made the experience even better.”

Nevertheless, the experience “was still great,” and when alums visit Erik, “they’ll ask about certain volunteers and those that have passed away.” Because of the media attention, they began holding their final meetings “out at the governor’s mansion,” at the invitation of Jim Doyle and his wife, “a former teacher.” When Scott Walker succeeded
Governor Doyle in 2011, Erik “hesitated to ask” if the offer still stood. The senior citizens urged him on: “you should just call anyway, and if they say no, we’ll complain.” Although they “got turned down,” Erik’s state senator, the “longest serving state representative in the country,” agreed to host the group in “a nice room at the capitol.” Though the “Dialogue across the Ages” has since fallen by the wayside, Erik “would love to” find a way to make it work in his current context. Aside from giving him the chance to do action research, it would no doubt “hook students” by introducing them to “stories of growing up in America, especially in a multicultural America.”

The “Dialogue across the Ages” program provided Erik’s students with social capital, and when Erik stepped into the role of department chair, he supported other teachers who had similar aims. One, for instance, was troubled by the privatization of driver’s education. When it was “part of the curriculum,” it had been “a great equalizer because it didn’t matter how much money you had. It didn’t matter if you had a car, you could get training and get your driver’s license.” Public transportation can be a challenge for Work and Learn students, because “the city’s kind of spread out,” so “that issue of a student not having a driver’s license […] is a really big deal.” Erik’s young colleague wondered, “Have we thought about a way to get a scholarship for students?” Erik encouraged him to look into it, and “the YWCA offered to partner on it, and so it was a really cool thing.” Memories like these make Erik proud of “that community that we had as teachers.” In his current context, that sort of initiative would have to “go through so many different channels,” whereas before, “it kind of happened” organically.

Likewise, Erik encourages students to think about social injustice and how to effect change. Because his lessons ideally allow “a more free-flowing type thing where
the students are working in groups, and they have a little choice,” he once had a trio who wished to explore “redlining and segregation in cities” and then created “public service announcements.” Although he “didn’t pursue that as an action research project,” the topic was certainly “of interest.” His learning, he knows, is inextricably connected to theirs, and activities like these, in addition to the “higher-order thinking skills that they develop through pursuing a question,” can also “impact their lives.” Erik elaborates:

I know I’m privileged. I know I have advantages that they don’t, and so when I see them become really passionate in uncovering […] why maybe some of these things are happening to them, it’s interesting to me, and it’s something that maybe I don’t know that much about, and I can learn from what they’re doing.

Teacher and student inquiry are so intimately related for Erik that both processes serve that liberating goal of education Jurgen Herbst suggested to him so long ago. Helping people “become better at digging beneath the surface of what they’ve been taught or what they’ve learned and how they learn it,” inquiry equips them to “break the machine.”

Navigating through Change

After Erik spent more than two decades at Work and Learn, the program merged with other alternatives to become a four-year option called Capital High. This took several years, multiple “incarnations,” and a lot of “big-systems work.” Erik reports spending “a lot of time […] with teacher teams, but those teacher teams are really dealing with some bigger structural issues, alignment issues across the district,” including a more standardized curriculum. In the past, if Erik faced “some initiative” from the district, he would find a way to “blend” it with action research, but now, “the thought of, ‘Hey, I’m going to do this action research project, which involves me changing up the curriculum a little bit,’ […] that just wouldn’t happen.” Launching into a project would require Erik to “convince [his] colleague on the other side of town to do the same
things,” and he is already skeptical of having to “teach the same lesson in four different classrooms in four different parts of the city.” He also has certain expectations to contend with as part of a “dual credit course” connected to the local community college. Though he “never want[s] to get into that mode” of being able to say “I did this on this day last year, and I'll do it exactly the same way again,” working with a “totally different” curriculum, including a new “advisory class” and “an independent math course,” on top of the dual credit “college success class,” has been quite a change.

Erik has always credited his success as a teacher researcher to “institutional support along the way,” and though he believes his administration gives an ear to teachers and has students’ best interests in mind, he cannot help but think he “was supported more in the past.” Then, the district championed “action research groups, where they just said, […] ‘Let us know what you find out. Just make sure the students are getting what they need for that next step.’” Now, he has noticed more “oversight,” and contends, “The things I’m asked to focus on aren’t the things that I’m as passionate about.” For example, teachers were asked to “track [their] interactions” with a single student. While Erik understands the “good intentions” at play, he found it “incredibly, incredibly hard to do, like, to gather that data,” suggesting, “I probably would’ve approached it in a different way had it just been said, ‘Hey, what’s one way you can look at interaction with a student?’ […] There are probably different ways of doing it.” A big believer in teacher and student autonomy, Erik argues, “If you have some semblance of choice there with parameters around it, there’s going to be more buy-in.”

Instead, he feels the “district is being run […] almost like a corporation,” replete with “a stronger organizational structure.” At times, this has a “top-down” vibe, owing to
“so many layers of administration,” including an uptick in visits from “administrators and assistant superintendents.” While some teachers might chafe at that, Erik sees it as a change “for the better” resulting from the district’s “equity vision.” He explains, “If you’re talking equity, then you’ve got to make sure that those schools that are serving kids that have been underserved are getting all the tools.” In prior years, Erik’s primary classroom visitors were “student teachers and the principal for [his] yearly evaluation.” The recent increase in “walk-throughs” seems to correlate with the school’s being “more resourced,” including “more support staff” endeavoring to provide “what students need.” He admits, “They put a lot of money and support into making sure that we’re successful, […] however they’re measuring it, whatever, you know, numbers they’re looking at.”

Erik’s perspective of the metrics-driven Accountability Era likely differs from those of teachers in more traditional settings. As a parent, he certainly witnessed the onslaught of standardized testing, but he claims, “We haven’t seen it as much […] in the alternatives because […] it was always there.” Students who were working on credit recovery obviously had to undergo a fair amount of testing, but Erik specifies, “A lot of the assessment that we would do was our own.” For example, students take a test that serves “as kind of an entry point into the classes at the community college,” which allows teachers “to gauge where they are.” Rather than attributing this to “a national shift” or a top-down mandate, Erik sees it as a result of “the district supporting us and seeing us as a pathway to a two-year school,” affirming the staff’s decision to acquire “good, authentic data” on students to help them achieve their post-graduation goals.

That said, Erik cites a less-helpful shift in that “they all take the ACT now because it’s state law that they have to take it as juniors.” While embracing the
opportunity to send the message that all students “can move on to college if they want,”
Erik is “not sure how helpful the actual taking of the ACT is,” especially when the
resulting data does not readily inform instruction. He recognizes how “data, data, data
have become really important,” but questions the prudence of a one-size-fits-all
approach “in such a small setting, when you have an n of 30.” In Erik’s opinion,
“qualitative stuff is where you can really see some things,” and his teacher research has
certainly been more along those lines.

Those small cohorts of “15 students or 30 students” make for a “unique situation
[...] with more opportunities to do action research.” Erik thinks “the hustle and bustle of
a big high school,” where you might be “teaching 100 or whatever students,” would not
be as conducive to “getting to know students,” whereas through inquiry,

I definitely became a better teacher for these students and especially for
students at the end of their high school careers. [...] I really got to see
what they were thinking, where their passions were, [and] what their fears
might be.

Working with smaller groups of students, especially when approaching them with an
inquiry stance, results in “a lot more insight,” which naturally carries into whatever “thing
you’re doing the next day.” He clarifies, “that can happen without action research and
inquiry, but it sure makes it a lot easier to [...] give that kind of support and advice.”

Erik’s student load has roughly doubled, though he is admittedly “lucky”
compared to most teachers. Still, transitions are tough, and this one has been limiting,
since he feels “kind of locked in,” compelled “to teach a certain way.” He adds,

When I can move back to the way that’s more of a discussion-based
classroom, more inquiry-based, I’d feel so much more comfortable, and I
think the students can sense that. [...] I’m definitely in my element when I
can bounce around and know that kids are connecting on something and
working through it on their own, rather than [...] ‘sit and get’ kind of stuff.
The lack of “flexibility to do cool things” is reinforced by the expectation that Erik align his curriculum with his cross-town teammate: “Pretty much what I’m supposed to do today is the same thing the guy across town is doing.”

In spite of these challenges, Erik is hopeful, vowing to take an inquiry stance towards his new advisory class. He has “seen really good things” and “jotted those down,” even inviting his students “to reflect a little bit.” To take those elements to the level of action research, he will have to “make a real conscious effort to get more feedback from students every week and really try to make that a better and more worthwhile experience for students.” At his age, he admits it is tempting to say, “Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. Tell me what to teach, and I’ll teach it.” When students have that attitude, “they can be a teacher’s dream in some ways, but in other ways, it doesn’t liven up the class that much,” so he reasons, “I probably have to do what I tell my students to do, which is reevaluate it, set a goal, […] make sure it’s meaningful […] and something they can actually attain, and kind of go for it.” Since our last interview, he has shared specific examples of how his optimism is paying off, noticeably eager to launch the 2018-2019 school year.

Erik is within striking distance of retirement, though he does not feel “ready to step out.” At the risk of sounding “boastful,” he shared how he has been approached about “leaving the classroom and impacting education in other areas,” but he has always declined the offer. These days, he might “actually entertain the interview,” especially if it promised the possibility of “working with a school district that’s trying to implement a change or […] build a school.” When his program was in transition, and he “could see the writing on the wall that [they] were going to be different,” he
contemplated a shift from teacher to “internship coordinator” before deciding, “I don’t think I’d want to just do that.” A teacher to the core, he feels, “There are still the little successes every day here that make it worthwhile, [...] and it would be tough to give that up, that personal connection.” Although he can envision himself teaching in another alternative program because it “could be neat to try something new and [...] build some courses,” he cannot imagine “walking across the street to the big comprehensive,” adding, “I don’t think I’d like that or want to do that.” Erik’s heart and history are in alternative ed., and he imagines “keeping [his] toes in the pool” even in retirement.

When Erik reflects on his journey as a teacher researcher, “the big thing” that stands out is the power of “forcing yourself [...] to listen to what students think.” Cultivating a habit of seeking “their input on how we go about learning together” and inviting them to share “what they got out of it” keeps Erik focused on getting to the point where a student just feels much better about themselves, their ability to learn, [and] their improvement as a learner. [...] A lot of them have been told many times that they couldn’t do it, [...] and then to have them create something and be aware of it and be able to take that next step in life is pretty cool.

He attributes those successes to his drive to solicit “more feedback from students,” which is just “good teaching,” as simple as “entry slips and exit slips.” Being a teacher researcher helps him see how that is vibrant data, capable of informing his practice, “so that when we start the next day, we’re on the same page.”

Through teacher research, Erik shows students he is “not there to tell them what to think” or “just pour stuff into their head.” Rather, even in his “later years,” he is not positioning myself as an expert, although, I mean, there are times where I guess I am. I am the teacher, but [...] I am here to learn with them, and we’re a community of learners. It’s a space where we can learn together.
Looking back on the projects he has completed, Erik insists, “I never would have just done something because it was for me.” Rather, his various explorations always manage to “fit in the curricular goals and expectations,” ably encouraging teacher and student reflection. Thus, inquiry is “natural and part of the process.” He can “weave” the existing “learning standards and the objectives” into “what [he] want[s] to learn and know about,” which is “just fun. It’s exciting when something cool pops up.”

That is precisely the stance Erik took when the Tea Party “wave […] coming out of the recession” hit Wisconsin, resulting in “cutbacks across the board.” Erik identifies as “the opposite of Scott Walker and his ilk,” and his union was at the center of political opposition to Act 10, the so-called budget repair bill that effectively “launched a war on labor” (Strauss, 2018). Advocating for Wisconsin’s “strong tradition of public schools,” Erik felt like he and like-minded colleagues had “a target on [their] back,” but at the same time, he recognized the “teachable moment.” He recalls “having to explain to students why you walked out or, you know, you weren’t there for 3 days and why they had 3 days off. It was great.” In typical Erik fashion, he invited his students to read the legislation and “have a conversation about it: that there are truly people who believe this on this side and believe this on this side, and then there might be another side.” He knows “they knew where [he] stood,” but his goal in the classroom was to show how

If it was in the headlines, it was something to talk about. It was something to learn about, and it wasn’t just ‘Let’s spout off our opinion.’ Let’s use this as a way to find out what a solid argument is. Let’s use this as a way to develop questions.

According to Erik, “with our current president, […] it seems like every day, there are teachable moments,” yet he is a little more hesitant to take advantage of them. He “can’t
just stop and all of a sudden […] talk about what’s going on. […] I can probably sneak it into advisory, but in the old system, that would have been front and center.”

As for the political reality of the Walker administration, Erik describes it as “taking our lumps.” Massive funding cuts have “made it difficult for districts,” and Erik “can’t imagine what it’s like […] to run a district and be on the school board and have to deal with some of those […] financial constraints, especially in rural Wisconsin.” Citing “heartbreaking” stories of “how they got screwed over,” he is mindful that he has “a really good job” and is “paid pretty well, you know, commensurate to [his] talents and education.” With his two-income household, he feels “ok,” but he worries about “the people that don’t earn as much,” for whom these changes—such as the loss of a fully funded pension—have been “a bigger shock to the system.” He adds,

I shouldn’t complain because I know there are teachers in rural Wisconsin that are barely getting by and districts that are suffering, and I read about what’s going on in Oklahoma and West Virginia and Kentucky. […] We still have it pretty good, but we had it really good, so that’s been a challenge.

The Act 10 cuts also got rid of employees’ two contracted days for conference attendance, “so all of our professional development now is done, you know, within the district.” While this gives Erik opportunities to talk about inquiry among local colleagues, it is striking to hear him say, “I haven’t been to an educational conference since…wow. It’s been a while.” Erik, however, is more concerned for his students, given the “social welfare programs that are taking a hit as a result of cutbacks,” meaning “they’re probably feeling the brunt of it a little more […] than [he does] as a teacher.”

Whereas Erik’s students “are definitely, definitely heroes” in his story, he is understandably tempted to call right-wing politicians the villains. As opposed to “community members” and “school board members that were supportive of the
program,” in Erik’s view, “the villains are the naysayers […] that weren’t so kind to our students.” Fortunately, such “crotchety old people […] are few and far between.” He is particularly grateful to have started his career with supportive administrators, and “administration in general” has been, “even to this day, very supportive of teachers, very supportive of students and figuring out the best way for students to succeed.”

On a recent teacher workday, Erik and his colleagues entertained the question, “If we could teach any class, what would you do?” Given that chance, Erik would set about “creating something new with student input,” which “would be fun” and inherently “more inquiry-focused” because he would not have an existing curriculum or syllabus “to draw from.” Excited by that prospect, he can imagine the direction he might take:

I would love to do a civil rights class, not just the history of civil rights. It could be something on social movements that would encompass […] stories of people who had to […] use the tools that were […] not always granted in the Constitution […] to change society, to ask America to live up to its ideals.

Attesting to Erik’s power as a change agent, at the time of this writing, he is bringing this dream to life. He shared, “It’s only going to be a 9-week course, but it’s a start.” Given Madison’s rich history of social movements, especially those involving students, Erik suspects such a course might “really hook” his students, inviting them to discuss present injustices and serving as a way to “get through some of the cynicism that people have” by showing them how “you can make change…that you really can do it.” From an academic standpoint, such a course would “build student skills” by illustrating “everything that you need to have a really solid discussion: […] you need to be able to read, you need to be able to find evidence, [and] you need to be able to listen to other people.” While that is technically possible with any content, Erik is particularly
passionate about the topic of social movements because “there are so many great, great stories out there,” including “stories that haven’t been told.”

When Erik thinks about his own story, he imagines “an independent film, […] one of those, you know, gems that you stumble across.” Unlike “a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster” with “a lot of flash,” Erik’s tale is one in which “learning about the characters makes the story” and there are “some really cool surprises along the way.” Indeed, Erik is so invested in his students’ success that he keeps in touch with them long after their hard-won graduation and is always keen to talk about “the ones that have gone on and really, really done well for themselves.” His journey with them would make for “mostly a comedy with some […] dramatic effects or scenes.” People who find out he teaches at an alternative school are sometimes quick to give “the pat on the back,” saying, “Good for you” or “I don’t think I could do that.” Erik resists being cast as the teacher savior, insisting “What people don’t know is our students are just looking for a different way to learn, a different way to experience the classroom.” As a teacher with an inquiry stance, he can meet that need.
For decades, teacher burnout has kept pace with the rise of neoliberal education reform (Buchanan, 2015; Farber, 1991; Green & Manke, 2001). Neoliberalism promotes competition and performativity among teachers and students, so “the active and the technical dominate over the passive and the humane,” effacing dispositions that literally do not rate (Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002, p. 1222). In this Age of Accountability, the narrow pursuit of marketable skills and misguided mandates for standardization threaten critical thinking at all levels of the education system (Worthen, 2018). However, teacher researchers, who systematically account for their own professional growth, can challenge the top-down status quo (Carr & Skinner, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Inquiring into their own practice becomes “a stance that is contrary” to dominant, metric-driven modes (Watts et al., 2011, p. 54) because it “break[s] down barriers between the researchers and researched” (Maiter, Joseph, Shan, & Saeid, 2013, p. 202). Thus, as a form of self-directed learning, teacher research is “inherently political” and a “counter-hegemonic force” (Brookfield, 1993, p. 229), provided teacher researchers can persist. This likely depends on who they are and how they came to be.

Extant scholarship suggests the cultivation of an inquiry stance “does not lend itself to a technical approach” and “is not quantifiable” (Rogers, 2016, p. 2). Teacher research is intentionally nuanced and interdisciplinary, grounded in “real situations with real children in real schools” (Klehr, 2009, p. 173), which happily sets it apart from the neoliberal accountability ethos. However, when teacher educators focus more on methods and management than inquiry, they fail to recognize how “teachers need not
only to be effective followers of rules or possessors of skills, but also certain kinds of 
researchers are the kind of people who persist, which Carini (2001) deems “the apt, the 
salient verb” because it connotes the ability to “both remain and change, […] acting by 
staying” (p. 55). Finding and/or fostering more persistent teacher researchers in the 
burnout-burdened Age of Accountability would seem to be a worthwhile—even critical—
task.

In light of that need, the purpose of this study was to explore the endurance of 
teacher researchers in the Age of Accountability by asking what dispositions enable 
them to maintain an inquiry stance. In this article, I draw from oral history interviews 
(Yow, 2005) with Cindy Ballenger, Gail Ritchie, and Erik Shager, 3 long-term teacher 
researchers who have persisted in a deprofessionalized profession and whose storied 
lives offer lessons for the persistence of teacher research and teachers writ large. First, 
I provide background information on teacher research and inquiry as stance. Next, I 
explain how this study uses sociocultural theories of narrative identity (Sfard & Prusak, 
2005) and the analytical techniques of “broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying 
to make sense of human experience as lived in context” (McDonald et al., 2016, p. 
1148). Then, I offer and discuss *storied stance*: mini-narratives of a disposition in action, 
poised to be “catalytic agents,” given how “all life stories, as they travel from the teller to 
the receiver,” can create “more stories” by “magnetizing others” (Carini, 2001, p. 62).

Borrowing a literary concept called negative capability—an imaginative capacity or 
“intermediate space that enables one to continue to think in difficult situations” (Simpson 
et al., 2002, pp. 1212-1213), I demonstrate how the storied persistence of Cindy, Gail,
and Erik to improve teaching and learning is a powerful parable for teachers and teacher educators who wish to hold accountability accountable.

**Literature Review**

Teacher research, action research, and practitioner inquiry interchangeably describe teachers’ cyclical, systematic study of their teaching, a practice dating back at least as far as John Dewey (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Out of this history, the inquiry stance construct emerged to capture how teacher research fuses “beliefs and actions” (Clayton, Kilbane, & McCarthy, 2017, p. 5). In other words, teacher research is ideally a way of knowing and being—far more than a simple list of steps in pursuit of a research question. Teachers with an inquiry stance become “deliberative intellectuals” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2) and critical pedagogues, actively engaging in “collaboration, reflexivity, dialogue, critique, risk taking, and advocating for change” (Wamba, 2011, pp. 173-174), even as they “stay rooted” in their daily work (MacDonald & Weller, 2017, p. 145). The endgame is not simply a more pleasant workplace, but more equitable experiences for students. Teacher research, therefore, is deeply political because inquirers “grapple with complex issues of power, ‘otherness,’ and equity” (Klehr, 2009, p. 173), ideally acting on their insights beyond the classroom walls.

Owing to this inside-outside push and pull, Kim (2013) frames teacher research as *Bildung*, “an intellectual and moral” formation of self, “open to the other […] without sacrificing one’s past, biases, and particularities” (p. 384). Akin to a mirror, inquiry reveals teachers’ identities as “reflected in their students’ attitudes,” ultimately resulting in a “more open” classroom (pp. 386-387). Thus, teacher research is inherently related to who teachers are, above and beyond what teachers do. More than just curious, teacher researchers are “wide awake” (Baker & Milner, 2016, p. 99). When inquiry
becomes a stance, so-called problems become learning opportunities (Yeigh, 2017) because teacher researchers relish “being made uncomfortable” and subverting traditional hierarchies: the teacher becomes the learner (Wamba, 2011, p. 171). Consequently, teachers with an inquiry stance use less transmissive and more engaging pedagogy, affirming everyone’s potential to generate knowledge (Clayton et al., 2017; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Kim, 2013). How, then, can teacher educators ensure their students develop and maintain an inquiry stance?

Meijer, Geijsel, Kuijpers, Boei, and Vrieling (2016), seeking to quantify discrete components of an “inquiry-based attitude,” attribute cyclical, self-directed professional development to both an internal and external dimension (p. 65). Their interest in promoting inquiry is admirable, but relying on statistics to achieve “scientific clarity” about an intangible disposition is woefully misguided (p. 65). Indeed, prior studies suggest a need to investigate both the perceptions and the pasts of teacher researchers by eliciting their stories, given how “personal views and prior experiences shape teacher conceptualizations of inquiry” (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 4). Storying stance, in other words, makes inquiry visible—and thus viable—for teacher education. This study took up that cause, intentionally enlisting late-career participants to explore and document the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers.

In so doing, I draw on prior studies of veteran educators. So-called “expert teachers” are often researchers because of a lasting “commitment to student learning and to their own learning” (Bray et al., 2000, p. 77). Both their self-assurance derived from a wealth of experience and their “motivation to remain engaged” and proactive set them apart from their peers (p. 78). An analysis of emeritus teachers shows a similar
“commitment to reflection, renewal, and growth,” since those who earn the emeritus label “continue contributing to their profession in some unique capacity” (Dagenais et al. 2000, p. 101). Not only do such educators deserve society’s gratitude for their continued and exemplary service, extant literature suggests both experts and emeriti—as well as their impact—warrant more scholarly attention.

More recently, van der Heijden et al. (2015) elucidated the traits of teachers who are considered—and consider themselves to be—change agents. Such teachers cope with constant reform by staying curious, collaborating with fellow lifelong learners to “professionally develop themselves” (p. 690). The comprehensive knowledge they gain through critical reflection manifests in their ability to cultivate similar dispositions in their students. As exemplary educators with high expectations, they consistently exhibit “a positive view” and “a passion for education” (p. 691). The qualities of these teachers are “closely related and mutually reinforce each other” (p. 696). Although their study makes no explicit mention of teacher research, the parallels are clear. Nevertheless, this article addresses a discernible gap in scholarship on teachers who study their own teaching.

Using the methodology described below, I break new ground by taking the long view, adding to our understanding of who teacher researchers are while at the same time articulating how those dispositions foster their powerful persistence.

**Methodology**

This article explores the following research question: What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? Operating from a view of knowledge as socially constructed (Crotty, 1998) and a theoretical perspective of identity as narrative (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to enlist 3 long-term teacher researchers retired from or currently working in public K-12 schools to
participate in 3 individual, semi-structured, phone interviews (Seidman, 2006). Guided by the principles of oral history (Yow, 2005), my interview protocols elicited participants’ professional life stories as the most appropriate data for understanding who long-term teacher researchers are and how they came to be. I started by soliciting nominations from scholars of teacher research, and preliminary screening calls ensured participants also believed themselves to meet the criteria for the study. After obtaining informed consent and conducting and transcribing all 9 interviews, I began formal analysis.

The zoom model of analysis surfaced “multiple levels of meaning” (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 393), consistent with my epistemology. Though I constructed the mini-narratives featured here, I did so largely with my participants’ words, recognizing their “dynamic process of self-constructing” (p. 394). By approaching analysis as though zooming in and out on 3 multifaceted snapshots of long-term teacher researchers, I was knowingly involved in both “the generation and selection of data” (p. 395), while at the same time adhering to the oral history tenet of positioning participants as active narrators (Yow, 2005). Aside from the interactional-zoom level, which accounts for the researcher’s influence, this article focuses on the meso and micro levels. The former can “illuminate the individual dimensions of a life history,” while the latter “reflects a commitment to maximize, not hold aside, the emotionality and affective complexity” (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 396). The stories featured here illustrate the critical dispositions of long-term teacher researchers, based on the qualities they attribute to themselves as well as those evident in how they tell their stories.

As consolidated versions of more extensive narratives crafted within my larger study of long-term teacher researchers in the Age of Accountability, the mini-narratives
below result from “storying and restorying” my data, a method of narrative inquiry (McDonald et al., 2016, p. 1148). Along with “broadening” and “burrowing,” these techniques facilitate “coarse-grained” and “fine-grained” analysis (p. 1148), akin to the levels of the zoom model. After honoring each participant with an individual mini-narrative, I look across these 3 examples of storied stance to identify the dispositions they have in common and articulate implications for teachers and teacher educators.

**Mini-Narratives of Storied Stance**

The following mini-narratives introduce readers to 1) Cindy Ballenger, a retiree in name only, whose Massachusetts teaching career began in the early 1980s; 2) Gail Ritchie, an educational consultant in Northern Virginia who started teaching in the early 1990s and has not exactly stopped; and 3) Erik Shager, who started working at an alternative high school in Wisconsin in the mid-1990s and shows no signs of stopping.

**Cindy**

A child of avid readers in suburban Illinois, Cindy devoted whole Saturdays to reading: “books were really adventures.” After skipping a grade at her parents’ urging, she was convinced other classes “got to do cool stuff” and “resented that [she] wasn’t in […] the lower IQ group.” Her “heavily tracked” and “competitive” high school magnified this view. Aside from English, Cindy’s track “took in a lot of stuff” without having to make sense of it, whereas outside of school, she would “lose time” with her young neighbors, awed by how they talked. These interests echoed in her years at Barnard College, where she majored in history and minored in Greek, drawn to the emerging field of sociolinguistics. Cindy then joined the anti-war movement in Massachusetts, which acquainted her with people “whose relation to schooling was somewhat different” than her own. She “learned a lot from what they knew,” relishing “the differences among us”
and the “full range” of humanity. The jocular storytelling of African-Americans and the white working class was especially intriguing, reinforcing her early interests.

Eventually, Cindy took a job in a daycare, though she “didn’t know what [she] was doing.” This made for “a pretty rocky start,” but she was curious about the language differences among the diverse children in her care. When she transferred to a clinical preschool, Cindy learned to wonder “what kids might know […] that [she] didn’t know,” surfacing “assumptions that middle-class people make about other people who aren’t so middle class.” She also followed her colleagues’ lead by seeking an additional degree, earning a master’s in early childhood special education in the mid-1980s. Because “kids are really fun, and it’s really fun to […] figure out information with them,” she began to embrace teaching as a career choice.

By the late ’80s, Cindy transitioned to a public school, just as the Boston area saw a rise in immigration from Haiti. The children were often “referred to early childhood special ed. because they just didn’t […] seem to fit.” One boy tested at an IQ of 70, “and after [Cindy] had him a little while, his IQ was 107.” Rather than congratulate herself for having “‘cured’ him,” Cindy presumed “there was a mistake somewhere in there,” especially when this “kept happening.” Attuned to “cultural misunderstandings,” she discovered, “They would sometimes say they spoke French because [speaking Creole] was sort of a sign that they were not educated, and so then the kid would be tested in French, […] and he wouldn’t do well.” Cindy was passingly fluent in French, but took it upon herself to learn Creole to facilitate her work with students.

Meanwhile, Cindy enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Boston University, where Jim Gee introduced her to teacher research, which became the method for her dissertation.
As a member of the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar (BTRS), started by one of Jim’s students, Cindy recorded her classes to understand “what wasn’t working” and discovered “things [students] say that are interesting or annoying […] could also be defined as those things I wouldn’t say or do.” The group used transcripts to dig into “moments […] where they did whatever we didn’t expect.” Each member would “speak the lines of whatever kid” and be “responsible for making sense of that kid” because “the kid who seems to be making the least sense is the canary in the coal mine.”

Members of BTRS also challenged each other to examine “linguistic differences among their students as a source of who got privilege and who didn’t,” noting how “they were responded to depending on the discourse style that they used.” In their diverse community with cross-town bussing, they strove to “take what kids [we]re doing or saying […] and wonder about the broader context,” intentionally trying to “connect with an intellectual tradition” as a way to “promote their academic achievement.” By working to “bring different kids’ ideas to the forefront,” Cindy saw the “powerful” and “transformative” potential for “kids who aren’t regarded as thinkers.”

As a BTRS member, Cindy realized her “ability to hear is really, really different.” Even at recess, she can “recognize things,” like the “argumentation style” of “African-American girls.” By focusing on the “patterns in what kids are doing,” she learned “to incorporate that rather than thinking it’s just something kids do outside.” Inside, Cindy used her “sensitivity” to “a broad range of literary response” to follow the students’ lead: even today, she maintains, “I always wonder where they’re coming from.” Once, a scene from a book she had always interpreted as funny had a profoundly different effect on students with “a strong sense” of what the character was going through. Letting them
“talk about things that are important to them” also “helped [her] see the book.” When she positions herself as a learner, “watching kids read books” is beneficial for all.

In the early ’90s, Cindy went to work on a professional development initiative at the Chèche Konnen Center, named after “search for knowledge” in Haitian Creole (TERC, 2014, para. 1). She adapted the BTRS model for science teachers “doing inquiries on their students’ scientific understanding at the same time as the teachers themselves were learning science together.” Inviting them to videotape their lessons, Cindy drew their attention to African-American students’ “argumentation styles and storytelling styles that were […] too funny or too dramatic […] for what the teachers were expecting.” By looking “much more broadly,” the teachers discovered “the science in those accounts,” and “could really include the full range of kids in their classes.” Eventually, Cindy “couldn’t stand it any longer” to be out of a classroom, thinking, “I do know some stuff that I need to […] put into action,” so as she was finishing up her doctorate, she got a job at King Open, a teacher-created school in Cambridge.

Cindy’s view of “what’s interesting in the world […] has always been the different ways people are,” attesting to her “integral” inquiry stance. Because teacher research easily became “a habit,” she could “see [her] objectives being met all over the place” or connect students’ “really different responses” to a “standard curriculum question,” without having “to corral the conversation.” Rather than “lay it all out” by announcing, “Today we’re going to look at the historical context of A Raisin in the Sun,” Cindy knows “kids will say these interesting things, like, ‘They did that back in the day?’” She can “let them experience it,” willing to “stop being such a teacher and become a fellow, […] more experienced participant.”
Throughout her career, Cindy maintained a relaxed attitude that “somehow” they would cover the curriculum, and “it was not a problem.” When she encountered a “kid who seem[ed] to be behind,” she would ask herself, “How does his question inform everyone? […] If we’re going to pursue him and his understanding, how’s that going to work for everybody?” During an interactive lesson on evaporation, a bewildered student who wondered where the water in a cup went searched for a hole: “At first we just ‘fixed’ him. We tell him, ‘No. No. It goes up,’” but she could “recognize that he was really wondering. […] He was really there.” These moments prompt reflection “about what other kids are missing and maybe what I’m missing.” It is deeply uncomfortable to admit, “I can’t reach this kid’ or ‘I have no idea what he’s talking about’ or ‘I totally blew it here,’” because “teaching is supposed to be full of such certainty.” Cindy embraces that discomfort as the first step toward progress.

This willingness to position herself as a learner has served her well as a teacher educator, too. She spent five years at Tufts, “having to speak what [she] knew,” which challenged her to “figure out what [she] knew.” Sharing her passion for inquiry, she advocated for student teachers to cultivate the habit of “identifying something annoying and then inquiring.” A retiree in name only, Cindy continues such work at Columbia, persisting as a teacher educator because she worries about “the young teachers” who struggle “to hang in there.”

She also worries about K-12 students, and as a literacy specialist, if Cindy witnesses “a kid being misunderstood,” she longs to “be the person in front of that kid.” Such students are “either silenced in a nice way, corrected in a nice way, or […] kicked out,” so Cindy turns to “story as [a] weapon,” sharing with teachers “stories about the
kids that they don’t see.” One student, for example, “was really mad about the caste system” during a lesson on Hinduism:

It seemed like such an obvious place to go: […] ‘Let’s listen to [him] talk about why he hates the caste system.’ […] He would have added a lot of intellectual energy, and he would have had a chance to shine.

Cindy “can hear these kids saying interesting things that could be picked up.” Instead of seeing a discipline problem, she suspects this student is “likely to have the best idea for how to think about Hinduism” because he is grappling so intensely with the concept.

In a similar situation, Cindy approached the principal to request an “independent study” so a student “could follow his instincts.” As an emeritus, Cindy is in a stronger position to advocate for students, but she has not always been comfortable leaning on her expertise. When she happened to have used the phrase “Research tells us” with a group of teachers, her audience was grateful:

I thought, ‘Well, shit. I should have been doing that all along!’ […] It felt like pulling rank, so it was always difficult for me to say, ‘Look. I read this stuff, and this is what it said,’ […] and it’s even more difficult for me to say, […] ‘Experience tells me that this will probably work.’ […] As long as I say ‘probably.’

Though it is “gratifying” when colleagues read her work, and despite having “never really gotten any negative feedback,” she does not “put it out there very much.”

Even so, Cindy keeps working—as a teacher, as a teacher educator, and as a teacher researcher. She recently encountered a 7th grader who “was throwing everything off,” so she wrote in her journal to figure out what to do. Knowing “being stern and strict” was not the right approach, and concerned the situation was “escalating down,” Cindy told herself, “I’ve got to reset.” Having “an inquiry stance” means “recognizing it’s not the kid. There are many, many approaches,” and when one proves problematic, “you’ve got to find another.” Cindy persists because she “feel[s] effective.”
She celebrates students’ “progress” while feeding her curiosity. Since those early years in Illinois, she has always felt children “are so curious and […] so interesting.” Her inquiry stance, in other words, “was just sort of in [her]” all along.

Gail

During the 1960s, young Gail, an army brat, attended multiple public schools: “even as a kid,” as the family moved from Kansas to Louisiana to Texas, she realized “some were good, and some were not.” They finally stayed put in Northern Virginia, where Gail later settled down with her own family. She “experienced” the impact of zip codes on school quality “just from moving around, but in the Northern Virginia area, you really see it.” As a child, Gail saw “a difference in quality” of school resources, so as an adult, she stays conscious of her “own little bubble,” currently consulting at an at-risk school. Gail worries about unjust systems that create an “uneducated underclass,” advocating for “free public education” as “a pathway to […] an adulthood that’s meaningful and fulfilling.” Her perspective, that of “an old liberal softy,” might “run contrary to prevailing beliefs in terms of who’s in power right now nationally,” but she does not hesitate to cast “people who are trying to undermine public education” as the “monsters or the dragons” in her “story.” Trying not “to dwell in too much negativity,” Gail appreciates how “comedic aspects” punctuate the more “dramatic” parts, convinced she is bound for “a happy ending,” though, tellingly, hers is “an unfinished journey.”

Gail’s grandfather, an Italian immigrant whose wife had an 8th-grade education, “worked so hard to make ends meet.” Education “was very important” to their “blue-collar family,” so she appreciates how “very fortunate” she has been, especially to have been affirmed in having “always been curious.” As a child, Gail played school, casting her younger siblings as her pupils. Her mother gave her an authentic roll book and
chalkboard, yet Gail did not feel called to the classroom until, “fortunate” to have been a stay-at-home mom, she watched her children “discover and learn about the world” and noticed a “natural affinity between [her] and kids,” while “volunteer[ing] in their preschools.” She “enjoy[s] them so much, and they seem to enjoy [her]. There’s just this simpatico.” Though her professional journey was roundabout, Gail believes “the universe is conspiring” to keep her on her path, provided she “stay open.” Incidentally, as a teacher and a learner, she prefers an “open-ended and differentiated” approach.

An avid reader from a young age, Gail benefited from a self-paced reading program in one of her schools, gravitating to “the higher end.” High school English furthered her interest in books, which later manifested in her preference for qualitative research: “it’s the stories of what worked and how and why it worked that are helpful.” Along her winding path to that point, she earned an ROTC scholarship to Northwestern, where she expected to launch into a music career. After considering how “cut-throat” that might be, full of “divas and a lot of back-stabbing” and requiring “self-promotion,” Gail acknowledged she is “not that kind of person,” majoring in history instead. After graduation, Gail fulfilled her ROTC commitment while stationed in California, serving as an officer in the Marine Corps. This “was an incredible experience in leadership and decision-making” and an excellent-but-unconventional foundation for her future.

In the early ’90s, when Gail finally decided to become a teacher, she enrolled at George Mason while serving “as a kindergarten assistant” at her “neighborhood school.” As she learned the importance of arranging “the space and the materials for kids to play and construct their own learning,” she and her fellow students had to “infuse play” within their field placements. Gail instantly thought of the classroom library, which, despite
being “well-stocked,” never attracted the kids’ attention. She “created the opportunity for a role” by experimenting with props, and the small change was a huge success.

This was almost like researching “without the label,” as Gail did not immediately identify as a researcher. She did, however, look forward to having a classroom of her own, knowing it would be “less teacher-directed and more teacher-facilitated,” in line with her emerging philosophy regarding “the purpose and value of play in classrooms of all ages.” When she was hired for a first-grade position at the same school where she had been an assistant and an intern, she made sure to keep “a painting easel open every single day.” As Gail continued to learn and grow as a teacher, “it was just a natural thing” for her to ask questions, from something seemingly innocuous—“Why is the classroom arranged this way?”—to more pressing matters, such as why some lessons seemed to fall flat. In those cases, she got to work “investigating and fixing it,” able to “notice the good things and continue with the good things and also to notice the things that weren’t working and to try to do something about them.”

Connecting with the district’s Teacher Researcher Network helped Gail formalize her wonderings, thereby “supporting student learning.” She was especially keen to reach out to them when her school shifted to multi-age classrooms, as she began to realize inquiry tends to be “proactive,” like when “something new is coming,” or “reactive,” when “there’s something about my classroom I don’t like or that’s puzzling me.” She “was always doing that naturally as a teacher,” such as “if there’s new curriculum on the horizon,” trying “to figure out how to unfold it with students,” or turning to “inquiry [as] a way of problem solving […] in that I saw a problem, and I delved into why it was a problem and what I could do about it.”
Gail was eager to start a teacher research group at her school but “didn’t know how to lead one.” She spent the next year in a self-imposed apprenticeship, “a very gentle way to acquire the knowledge, […] alongside somebody who knows what they’re doing.” By the year’s end, Gail felt “ready to […] have a go with facilitating.” Eventually, she was co-leader of the entire district-wide network: “I call myself a teacher leader now from a safe distance and in retrospect, but [initially] I was not comfortable with that label.” Viewing teaching as “an egalitarian profession,” she argues, “you don’t want to puff yourself up too much and have people think of you as, like, ‘Who does she think she is?’” Even as a group leader, she was “really careful not to puff [herself] up.”

Whether she embraced the mantle or not, Gail clearly earned recognition: she was Teacher of the Year for 2000-2001 and among the first in her district to earn National Board Certification. This “gave [her] a big voice,” opening “opportunities for good.” Some of these occurred at the local level, such as inquiring with and alongside interns, who “could become co-researchers and help with data collection or […] just by virtue of the conversations we had, develop an inquiry stance of their own.” Other opportunities were broader in scope, such as when Gail helped initiate school-wide “learning circles.” Having returned to George Mason for a doctorate, she also qualified to serve as an adjunct, working with pre-service teachers as “they embarked on a research project.” She “tried to bring that more practical reality into it” by showing how inquiry can mesh “with the natural ebb and flow of your classroom.”

Over the course of her teaching career, Gail accumulated a plethora of success stories to share with new inquirers. As a K-1 teacher, she had noticed writing was “a burdensome time of day” and surmised, “There must be something that I am doing in
terms of organizing and instruction that’s not cutting it.” Going into “problem-solving mode,” she thought, “I don’t like how this is going. Why is it going this way, and what can I do about it?” Being willing to “embark” on a major study helped her totally transform her approach. In a subsequent year, she played with social studies, indulging her students’ curiosity about timelines. What started as a simple way to accomplish one of their curriculum standards ultimately surfaced deep lessons about “what history actually is and how it’s constantly being made, like everything that occurs now, once it becomes something that’s already happened, […] it’s history.” Across the disciplines, Gail’s inquiry stance undergirds her long-standing belief in the value of an “open-ended” classroom. Whereas a typical teacher often “shuts it down,” Gail’s “favorite questions from students came up as tangential questions,” which she welcomed because “that’s an important part of life, […] to wonder and ask why.” Proudly “reflective by nature,” she claims, “I think I just came that way” and “can’t remember” otherwise. Being an elementary school teacher gave her ample opportunity to exercise her own curiosity while activating and affirming her students’ curiosity, too.

In her final year in the classroom, Gail devoted her “problem-solving stance” to “behavioral issues.” Relying on teacher research for help with “a student or students who are puzzling” prompts her to ask, “What’s setting them off? […] How might I be proactive in addressing antecedents?” For this class, she wanted to “support them in developing behaviors that would be more compatible with school without breaking their spirits. […] I didn’t want to turn the boys into automatons, and neither did I want to squelch any leadership qualities in the girls.” Enlisting them as “co-investigators,” she
invited them to “look specifically at their own individual actions” on film, guiding them to take notice and control of their own behavior.

Before Gail retired in 2017, after a decade as a K-6 instructional coach, she spent a few years at the district office, supporting teacher research on a grander scale. Now, she coordinates with a former principal to enact “school-wide professional development that is inquiry-based.” The transition from coach to consultant has provided a renewed sense of purpose. A proud “emeritus,” she can “take all [her] years of experience and use it for good,” embracing the title of “teacher leader” because she senses “people look to [her] for expertise.” Because she “never held a doctorate as a classroom teacher,” she did not have to worry about “lording it over people,” but now, going by “Dr.” feels a little more “appropriate.”

Gail maintains her habit of “wondering why this works or why this doesn’t work or what makes this person tick or [...] why is that gelling or not gelling?” It is “so much a part of [her]” that she catches herself generating field-notes while volunteering at her grandson’s school. She is simply “introspective and curious by nature,” elaborating,

It’s my way of being, and so it was my way of being a teacher and will probably always be my way of being. I even am that way as a volunteer, and I’m definitely that way as a consultant [...] as a grandparent. [...] It’s just who I am.

Gail delights in going down “rabbit holes” because “You never know everything. There’s always more to find out,” because “the more you find out, the more questions you have.” Inspired by this paradox, she uses it “to advance the philosophy of inquiry-based practice and being reflective and supporting student learning through knowing your students well.” Of course, she also continues to advocate for the value of play: “that has
kind of been my thing as a teacher, as a teacher leader, and even now as a consultant.” She claims, “I’ve never given up on that, and I never will.”

Erik

When Erik reflects on his story, rather than “a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster” with “a lot of flash,” he sees “an independent film, [...] one of those [...] gems that you stumble across.” It is “mostly a comedy with some [...] dramatic effects,” as well as “some really cool surprises along the way.” Though he might “sound like the sappy teacher,” he insists students are the heroes, rejecting the role of teacher-savior and simply grateful for “the privilege of watching them [...] walk across the stage and also come back and talk about [...] what they’ve accomplished.”

The product of a “lower middle-class upbringing” in 1970s Wisconsin, Erik, alongside “professors’ kids and the doctors’ kids and the lawyers’ kids,” attended “the better” of his district’s two high schools, where the classes were “tracked pretty hard.” He figured he and his sister “would go to the state school that was in town because it was cheap and [they] could live at home,” but he was far less certain about what to do beyond that. After briefly considering teaching, he settled on a history major, having enjoyed high school social studies because of the “stories that we could learn from.”

When Erik moved to Madison after graduation, he took a job at the campus bookstore and spent a few years reading “what [he] wanted to read, not what somebody was telling [him] to read.” After he “stumbled across Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) Savage Inequalities and read that book a few times,” he enrolled in the social studies education program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. There were stark differences between his first and second teacher education programs, but the intervening years—and the move to a “pretty progressive” and “more diverse” area—had also made him “more
aware” and “more ready to be a teacher.” At 24, he “saw the world differently.” In one class, the professor shared a “social research project,” inspiring Erik to think about “getting students interested in their community” so “they can be active citizens.” Another course made Erik “excited about the history of the public school in America,” particularly as a launchpoint for questions like “Why are we educating people? Should we educate them to […] be cogs in the machine or should we educate them to break the machine?”

When it came time for student teaching, Erik felt drawn to an alternative program called Work and Learn. Having volunteered in neighborhood centers and witnessed “the reality of a different educational system than the one [he] grew up in,” the one in which he—and, he suspects, most teachers—succeeded, Erik chose to work with “kids that were […] struggling in the system.” When he went on the job market, there was “an opening at the sister program,” also called Work and Learn, so Erik began his long—and ongoing—career in alternative education with students who are “extremely credit-deficient,” yet “really, really talented.” Erik insists, “no matter where you are, you can improve.” It just takes a “very, very individualized” approach to “figure out how” to help each “individual learner.” Thus, Erik intentionally developed his curriculum around identity: “who you are, where you’re going, what you believe in,” and other “big questions,” like “Why are people the way they are? Why am I the way I am?” Challenging students to “come up with their own understanding,” he was “learning about [himself] and helping them learn about themselves.”

Among the faculty, he sometimes felt like a “lone wolf” who “was just starting out,” while “everybody else was probably within five years of retirement.” Erik embraced his identity as a “newer teacher,” frequently asking, “What the heck just happened?
What could I have done better?” An advertisement for a district teacher research group spoke to those very questions, built around a theme of resiliency, “a topic [he] didn’t know much about.” Erik’s students tend to be “low on the socioeconomic scale” and are often “living really transient lives,” so he was intrigued. With the group’s support, Erik “focused on the one thing in [his] job that [he] didn’t feel as confident in”: the vocational component of Work and Learn. His “lack of experience” as well as “a curiosity as to what’s happening” prompted him to examine how “students definitely gain […] social capital from being in the community. They […] bring those things back into the classroom and build resiliency.” One student shared how his work in a real estate office gave him “that on-the-square type feeling,” because “the center of government” is white-collar […] people, on nice spring days, [who] walk around the capitol and buy […] lunch from food carts. […] He goes, ‘That’s what I want,’ and this is a kid […] who would rarely get up on the capitol, but he’s there.

The insights Erik gleaned helped him “structure [his] class […] a lot more efficiently,” which also sent a message to students: “this experience is there to benefit them.”

From his very first project, Erik viewed teacher research as something that can “fit in the curricular goals and expectations” and become “natural and part of the process.” He enjoys trying to “weave” existing “learning standards and the objectives” into “what [he] want[s] to learn and know about,” which is “just fun. It’s exciting when something cool pops up.” When Erik noticed students’ interest in a book by Patrice Gaines (1994), who worked for The Washington Post, he designed an opportunity for students to e-mail her. Patrice was a generous pen pal, and Erik asked students to “fill out reflections before and after they wrote her” to gauge how, if at all, their interactions impacted students’ motivation as readers. Not only were they willing to read more, but they were also “willing to write more […] when they had that connection.”
“powerful” experience also had “really cool outcomes” beyond the academic value, proving to be “a self-esteem builder for students.”

Watching his “kids getting connected” with Patrice inspired Erik to design more opportunities for them “to interact with […] authors […] and realize that they’re really cool people that care.” He also wrote a grant, so Patrice “came in and did a writing workshop for all of the students in the alternative programs.” Emerging as a teacher leader, and feeling “pretty solid” about teacher research, Erik pursued a master’s degree at UW-Madison. His thesis, a teacher research project on class discussions, taught him “when students have a voice, […] they’re more likely to become engaged […] and produce better work.” Whenever possible, his lessons are “a more free-flowing type thing where the students are working in groups, and they have a little choice.”

Graduate school also inspired Erik to engage in parallel and collaborative inquiry with students, especially to investigate social injustice and how to effect change. The most vivid example, Erik’s biggest teacher research project, ultimately became a book chapter. Students explored one set of research questions: “Why are students dropping out of high school […] and specifically why are kids of color dropping out at a higher rate?” Erik acted as “kind of a facilitator” while simultaneously “researching their research.” Not only did the project benefit his own students, who, having stayed in school, “felt good about themselves,” but they all learned about the literal value of such research when “the head assessment data guy from the district goes, ‘Wow, Erik. We spent 80 grand to find this out. You know, it’s kind of cool that your students did it.’” Erik recognized how, in addition to the “higher-order thinking skills that [students] develop through pursuing a question,” inquiry can also “impact their lives.” He admits
I know I’m privileged. I know I have advantages that they don’t, and so when I see them become really passionate in uncovering […] why maybe some of these things are happening to them, […] I can learn from what they’re doing.

When inquiry leads to “digging beneath the surface of what they’ve been taught,” it can help them, as his professor once suggested, “break the machine.”

Erik’s devotion to “changing the narrative” of alternative education can also do that. Any time he introduces himself, he gets that “automatic” reply and has to contend with the “juvenile delinquent” stereotype. Equally prevalent—and pernicious—is assuming “they’re all special ed. [or] they all have learning disabilities.” What is most troubling is when students internalize the message that “they’re all bad kids.” Inquiry has made him “a better teacher for these students and especially for students at the end of their high school careers” because it essentially requires “forcing yourself […] to listen to what students think” and seeking “their input on how we go about learning together.”

By placing “value” on their “feedback,” even as simple as “entry slips and exit slips,” Erik shows students he is “not there to tell them what to think” or “just pour stuff into their head,” nor is he “positioning [him]self as an expert.” He adds, “There are times where I guess I am. I am the teacher, but […] I am here to learn with them, and we’re a community of learners.” The systematic process of teacher research supports Erik’s natural curiosity: “I don’t think there was ever a time where I said, ‘I’m going to come in and this is the question I’m going to ask.’ […] I always went through a series.” Sometimes, as a result of soliciting student input, he “started seeing the results or looking at data, […] and it was like, ‘Oh! I should be looking at this.’”

Participating in teacher research groups played a big part, yet even in the absence of collaborators, he might “just do a little project,” telling himself, “I’m going to
try this and see what happens. I’m going to look at the data and see what students think about it.” In teaching and in teacher research, his attitude is always one of “give it a shot and see what happens and see what students have to say,” and he maintained that stance as the department chair, encouraging teachers with similar aims.

For years, Erik invited students to engage in a “Dialogue across the Ages” by meeting with retirees at the Madison Senior Center. Though Erik is still “kicking [him]self” for not collecting any data, he knows the interaction between “at-risk high school youth” and “retired attorneys and administrators” raised implications for “the public as a whole.” One volunteer “had no interaction with young people in her life, and […] what she knew was what she saw on TV, and the stories she saw on TV were not good.” The monthly dialogues offered the senior citizens a more “authentic understanding of what young people were like in Madison,” while at the same time offering the senior students valuable social capital. When the event received local media coverage, Governor Jim Doyle’s wife, Jessica, “a former teacher,” arranged for them to hold their final meeting “out at the governor’s mansion.”

When that became Scott Walker’s house in 2011, Erik’s visits to the mansion ceased, and the Tea Party budget cuts began. Belonging to the union at the center of the protest meant having to “explain to students why you walked out or […] why they had 3 days off,” which “was great,” but Erik “can’t imagine what it’s like […] to run a district and be on the school board and have to deal with some of those […] financial constraints, especially in rural Wisconsin.” He worries about “the people that don’t earn as much,” for whom the loss of a fully funded pension is “a bigger shock to the system.” His students, too, given the “social welfare programs that are taking a hit as a result of
cutbacks,” are “probably feeling the brunt of it.” Within striking distance of retirement, Erik is not “ready to step out” because “there are still the little successes every day, […] and it would be tough to give that up, that personal connection.” He imagines “keeping [his] toes in the pool” even in retirement, but for now, he is all in.

**Reading between the Lines: Negative Capability**

As the mini-narratives above attest, teaching is an extraordinarily complex endeavor, requiring “capacities, dispositions, and qualities” among “the most difficult that human agents might ever be called upon to acquire or cultivate” (Carr & Skinner, 2009, p. 153). This study honors that complexity, demonstrating how long-term teacher researchers’ dispositions are embedded in their professional life histories because inquiry is “embedded in life” (Phillion et al., 2005, p. 1). Like teacher identity development in general (Buchanan, 2015), developing and maintaining an inquiry stance is a lifelong project, and understanding that demands a long view.

Incidentally, one theme emerging from that long view is the power of story itself. From an early age, each narrator gravitated to the humanities, recounting formative K-12 experiences in language arts and social studies, as well as their undergraduate degrees in history. Carr and Skinner (2009) worry “relatively few” teacher candidates “seem to read widely for pleasure and/or intrinsic interest” (p. 152), yet Cindy, Gail, and Erik are bright and avid readers, which clearly infuses their inquiry stance. Cindy, for example, explicitly refers to “story as [a] weapon,” which she wields in support of students who are overlooked or misjudged by typical metrics. As a teacher researcher, Gail intentionally turns to qualitative modes, arguing, “It’s the stories of what worked and how and why it worked that are helpful.” Erik, likewise, chose to major in history because of his passion for “stories we [can] learn from,” and the riveting stories in
Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* ultimately inspired him to be a teacher, reinforced by his history of education course. In other words, the mini-narratives that story the stance of Cindy, Gail, and Erik also reveal how they, too, are comfortable with and capable of storying, since their lifelong habits of inquiry are deeply connected to their pronounced interests in history, literature, and language.

Noting how literature, like life, is “something flowing, something continually changing,” Poulet (1972) suggests critical readers tap into “a kind of inner vacuum” marked by an empathic openness to an author’s point(s) of view (p. 46). Two centuries ago, poet John Keats ascribed a similar quality to Shakespeare, whom he believed to be wholly devoid of egotism: “He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become” (Bate, 1939, p. 30). In the years since Keats referred to this as *negative capability*, the idea has attracted vast scholarly attention, well beyond the English department (Gundy, 2014; Hendrick, 2014; Joyce, 2016). Leadership scholars, for instance, find negative capability to be a valuable concept “for everyone wanting to learn, grow, or lead” (Saggarthi & Thakur, 2016, p. 181), using the philosophy to extol the virtues of patience and doubt in a historically active and assertive field.

Simpson and French (2006) embrace “the awkward (‘empty’) space” of not knowing, despite the tension this “stance” causes for leaders (pp. 246, 252). Their work clarifies the “negative” in negative capability: not in the least pejorative, it complements leaders’ more pronounced traits, like the cooperative poles of a magnet. When leaders are “waiting, observing and listening,” their actions “are not negative per se” (Simpson et al., 2002, p. 1211). Rather, just as literary texts contain “a highly dynamic power momentarily caught at rest” (Bate, 1939, p. 61), negative capability means recognizing
we are “always in the process of becoming” (Townsend, 2011, p. 171). This proves instrumental in circumstances “that are themselves ‘negative’, such as not knowing what to do, not having adequate resources, and not trusting or being trusted” (Simpson et al., 2002, p. 1210). These conditions abound in the Age of Accountability. Thus, for teacher researchers, negative capability is a critical characteristic in these critical times.

How, then, does one acquire negative capability? Bate (1939), who literally wrote the book on the subject, explains how Keats and Shakespeare have the same “peculiar bent of mind” (p. 10), suggesting it is innate and exceptional. Others argue critical reading can surface and support the negative capability in all of us: “Once the scientist reaches his conclusions ignorance is dispelled,” whereas literary minds, “even in a second, third, or hundredth reading,” are more apt to resist “authoritative, external explanations” in favor of “complex or ambiguous emergent meanings” (Tsur, 1975, pp. 778-779). Consequently, Wear (2004) uses literature “to enlarge [students’] capacity to identify with others” (pp. 170), and Joyce (2016) introduces negative capability to doctoral students as “a tool for undoing previous inflexible or unproductive modes of thought,” encouraging their use of qualitative, narrative approaches (p. 412). Likewise, Burt (2014) turns to negative capability when “trying not merely to account for but to respond to” (p. 263, emphasis mine). It is, he argues, “something we best experience first hand in imaginative literature” or anything “we live our way into intimacy with” rather than “expect to describe exhaustively” (pp. 270-272). Because the inherent and evolving complexities of teaching do not lend themselves to the latter, Keats’s construct can deepen our understanding of the dispositions most conducive to an inquiry stance. With that in mind, the discussion below will read between the lines of the mini-narratives
above, interweaving the teacher researchers’ tales to explore the persistence of their storied stance.

**Discussion: The Dispositions of Long-Term Teacher Researchers**

The mini-narratives of Cindy, Gail, and Erik, which story the stance of these long-term teacher researchers, also illustrate negative capability at work. Specifically, 5 dispositions comprise the negative capability demonstrated across their narratives, intimately connected to their inquiry stance: 1) playful curiosity, 2) critical awareness, 3) a willingness to be disturbed (Wheatley, 2009), 4) humble empathy, and 5) optimistic leadership and advocacy. I elaborate on each of these below, articulating how these elements contribute to the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers by interlacing salient details from their mini-narratives.

**Playful Curiosity**

Without curiosity, teacher researchers cannot get very far. There are procedures and processes to guide cycles of inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014), but these are no match for a natural, playful, and constant curiosity (van der Heijden et al., 2015; Yeigh, 2017). Likewise, negative capability promotes a willingness “to question, often if not always” (Gundy, 2014, p. 467) because each “new situation raises new questions […] in an endlessly ongoing process” (Magee, 2015, p. 50). For practitioners of any sort, this means ignorance is not “a state to be done away with as quickly as possible,” but rather a “systemic reality” with educative potential (Simpson & French, 2006, p. 246). Through “inquiry that encourages dialogue and self-reflexivity,” individuals can channel their curiosity into “play and exploration” (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016, pp. 188, 190). True to the literary origins of negative capability, this becomes a creative force.
While teacher educators have long wondered how to cultivate an inquiry stance in their students (Yeigh, 2017), looking across the mini-narratives, there is reason to believe it is, in part, innate. For Cindy, the stance is “integral,” as it “was just sort of in [her].” She has “always” been interested in “the different ways people are,” and that curiosity has driven her extensive career, whether teaching preschool, providing professional development to science teachers, supporting struggling readers, or serving as a teacher educator. In all of those instances, Cindy’s persistent curiosity is nourished by her playful temperament. She insists, “It’s really fun to […] figure out information.”

Likewise, Gail enjoys watching young people “discover and learn about the world,” describing the “simpatico” of the “natural affinity” she shares with them. She attributes such rapport to the fact she has “always been curious,” presuming she “just came that way,” since she “can’t remember” any different. Rather than providing her with that curiosity, teacher education provided her with a powerful way to use it: figuring out how to “infuse play” into her early childhood classroom in truly constructive ways. Asking questions “was just a natural thing,” which ably supported her aim to promote “the purpose and value of play in classrooms of all ages.” That is something she has “never given up on” because of her own playful and constant curiosity: “the more you find out, the more questions you have.”

Erik, too, expresses a career-long curiosity, always asking “what’s happening” or even “what the heck just happened?” Not only do the “big questions” of humanity naturally inform his curriculum, but his innate “curiosity as to what’s happening” is also evident in his efforts to provide beneficial experiences to students outside of the classroom. As is the case with Cindy and Gail, Erik’s natural, playful curiosity primes
him to stay open to data for teacher research. He does not have to force it by insisting, “I’m going to come in and this is the question I’m going to ask.” Rather, his inquiries arise organically. Curiosity is at the core of all 3 long-term teacher researchers, but curiosity alone does not account for their persistence.

**Critical Awareness**

The creative, playful curiosity of negative capability stems from a “flexible personality” and a “loosening of rigid categories” (Tsur, 1975, pp. 786-787), or in other words, “an open mind” (Wigod, 1952, p. 384). In contrast to one who “shuts himself up in a circle of articulated formulae, premises and results, definitions and conclusions” (Bate, 1939, p. 16), an individual with negative capability stays receptive to “lessons available in front of [his] eyes” (Raelin, 2007, p. 506). Whereas “unquestioned certainty” leads to “ideological dogmatism,” negative capability fosters “open-endedness” and resists “conceptual closure” (Chia & Morgan, 1996, pp. 55-56). A hallmark of critical thinkers, negative capability thus runs counter to more “recipe-driven” modes (Chia & Morgan, 1996, p. 39). Echoing critics of neoliberal education reform, Saggurthi and Thakur (2016) fault the “activity trap” of performance pressures for leaders' loss of “time and space to allow [their] thoughts to emerge” (p. 181). Teachers, too, are vulnerable to these pressures, especially in the Age of Accountability, yet teacher researchers with an inquiry stance remain open and “wide-awake” (Baker & Milner, 2016, p. 99), reflecting on their classroom practice and the larger ramifications of their work.

At a young age, all 3 narrators demonstrated a capacity for critical awareness. Cindy and Erik specifically mentioned the impact of tracking on their K-12 experiences, while army brat Gail, who is “introspective” and “reflective by nature,” noticed significant disparities as she moved from school to school. These formative lessons stayed with
each of them on the road to teaching and to teacher research. Erik, for example, spoke of becoming “more aware” as he grew up and moved to Madison, which made him more receptive to teacher education. His diverse field experiences reinforced this disposition, prompting critical reflection on a “reality” different from his own. Throughout his career in alternative education, he has remained mindful of his students’ socioeconomic realities and attuned to opportunities for their development of “social capital.”

This parallels Cindy’s experience with the anti-war movement, which opened her eyes to “the differences among us,” foreshadowing the observations she would go on to make while working in diverse early childhood contexts. Cindy’s critical awareness is strikingly dialogical, from her teenage talks with young neighborhood kids to her powerful exploration of transcripts alongside fellow BTRS members. Her acute—and exceptional—listening skills help her recognize how “linguistic differences” create unjust power differentials. This awareness keeps her open to “a broad range” of students, promoting an asset view of all learners. Consequently, she treats so-called discipline problems as learning opportunities, using a reflective journal to focus on that goal.

Gail also uses reflection in critical ways, examining her own behaviors and beliefs to improve her teaching. Her awareness manifests in her ability to “notice the good things and continue with the good things and also to notice the things that [a]ren’t working.” She is not afraid to admit when there is “something that [she is] doing […] that’s not cutting it,” such as when her K-1 writing block had become “a burdensome time of day.” Significantly, the adjustments she makes as a result of her critical awareness are not just for her benefit. For example, her story about “supporting
[students] in developing behaviors” while simultaneously affirming “their spirits” echoes how Cindy’s inquiry stance serves her when so-called behavior problems arise.

Gail thus speaks to how inquiry simultaneously benefits teachers and students. She prefers an “open-ended” classroom that is “less teacher-directed and more teacher-facilitated,” mirroring her personal philosophy of “stay[ing] open” to “the universe.” Similarly, Erik’s critical awareness translates into innovative and “free-flowing” pedagogy, which increases his students’ engagement as well as their self-esteem. He celebrates “learning about [himself]” while “helping them learn about themselves.”

Likewise, Cindy has long been willing to follow students’ lead. In her current position, she continues to advocate for “the full range of kids” and challenges herself to “stop being such a teacher and become a fellow […] participant.” Educators’ impact is what truly matters, and these long-term teacher educators ably account for that. Each cites evidence of academic improvement—whether in reading, writing, or higher-order thinking. Being open, reflective, and aware primes them to notice and celebrate success, while at the same time preparing them to confront the challenges they face.

**A Willingness to be Disturbed**

The critical awareness of individuals with negative capability is coupled with what Wheatley (2009) refers to as a willingness to be disturbed: an ability to embrace challenge and discomfort as sources of growth, especially because “our ignorance grows with our knowledge” (Magee, 2015, p. 50). Owing to their tolerance for ambiguity and complexity (Simpson & French, 2006), they exhibit “an aversion to forming comfortable—but in reality unsatisfying—resolutions” (Wigod, 1952, p. 384). Thus, Shakespeare, per Keats, is “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, [and] doubts” (Bate, 1939, p. 16), just as the ideal teacher, per Dewey (1910), can endure the “mental
unrest and disturbance” inherent in “maintain[ing] the state of doubt” while engaging in “systematic and protracted inquiry” (p. 13). Scholars have noted the perpetual doubt of practitioner inquiry as a source of both pleasure and pain (Ermeling, 2010; Wamba, 2011; Yeigh, 2017), yet long-term teacher researchers must learn to embrace the habit of problematizing practice, just as negatively capable people celebrate “problem-finding” (Burt, 2014, p. 274), a habit of deliberative intellectuals (Chia & Morgan, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). According to Rogers (2016), “uncertainty […] is an enduring component of teaching, […] an inherent but manageable condition” (p. 2). Long-term teacher researchers know this to be true.

Gail lives this truth by claiming, “You never know everything. There’s always more to find out,” prompting her to engage in inquiry in both “proactive” and “reactive” ways. Embodying the principle of negative capability that ignorance and knowledge grow in tandem, Gail could “freely admit” her ignorance as a teacher and delight in employing her “problem-solving mode” or “stance” at any opportunity. She never shied away from challenging situations; rather, she embraced what was “puzzling” as an opportunity to learn: “delving into why it was a problem and what I could do about it.”

Neither Gail nor Cindy has truly retired because there is always more to learn. Though Cindy has come a long way from her daycare job when she felt she lacked expertise, she is still open to understanding “what [she’s] missing” or digging into “annoying moments,” especially as a way to chart a more equitable course towards academic improvement. Her willingness to be disturbed manifests in her willingness to admit “what [i]sn’t working,” or even—in the case of her suspicious ability to “cure” the IQ of Haitian immigrants—to question what seems to be working. As a child, having
been placed in a high IQ group herself, she questioned how they “took in a lot of stuff” without having to work very hard. Because of her comfort with discomfort and her recognition of the value of being challenged, Cindy is not looking for the easy route.

Likewise, Erik intentionally chose to work with “kids that were […] struggling in the system,” just as he is willing to admit when he, too, struggles. Erik’s first foray into teacher research was inspired by his “lack of experience,” yet he is still positioning himself as a learner and setting goals in the face of new challenges. His inquiry stance helps him maintain the “very, very individualized approach” so crucial to the success of alternative education. Essentially willing to be disturbed, he knows he has to “figure out how” to help each “individual learner,” no matter what it takes. Like his fellow narrators, he even enjoys the challenge of merging his natural curiosity with existing “learning standards” or “curricular goals.” Indeed, all 3 long-term teacher researchers exhibit remarkable comfort with challenging situations, including their pursuit of advanced degrees while juggling their responsibilities as full-time teachers. However, in spite of their scholarly expertise, they are humble, through and through.

Humble Empathy

Long-term teacher researchers, as negatively capable individuals, are willing to be disturbed because they admit there are “obvious gaps and lapses of our knowledge and wisdom, the everyday imperfections of our lives,” which gives them “a humility both modest and bold” (Gundy, 2014, p. 467). This is why Keats referred to a genius like Shakespeare as “nothing in himself” (Bate, 1939, p. 30, emphasis mine). Practicing “egalitarian pedagogy” (Watts et al., 2011, p. 45), teacher researchers consent to a “delicate position,” in which they “guide their students even as they are guided by them” because they recognize humans are always “in the process of knowing” (Hubbard,
This humility, in concert with the other dispositions, frees teacher researchers to empathize with their students, which is critical for teachers who wish to act as change agents (van der Heijden et al., 2015).

In spite of well-deserved accolades, all three narrators acknowledge their privilege in ways that activate their inquiry stance. Too humble for a career in music, Gail distinguished herself as a National Board Certified educator and Teacher of the Year without “lording it over people.” Neither her journey to teacher research nor teacher leadership were about self-promotion. On the contrary, Gail initially shirked “the label” of researcher and intentionally positioned herself as an “apprentice” so she could learn how to practice and promote inquiry. She insists teaching should be “an egalitarian profession,” and although going by “Dr.” may feel more “appropriate” in retirement, Gail is still mindful of her “own little bubble,” prompting her empathy for the “uneducated underclass.”

Cindy, too, has a powerful soft spot for “kids who aren’t regarded as thinkers.” This is profoundly clear in her longing to “be the person in front of” any student who is “being misunderstood.” Like Gail, she has not always been comfortable positioning herself as an expert because she is much more prone to learning with and from the students in her charge. This disposition goes all the way back to her formative experiences in the anti-war movement, where she “learned a lot from what [others] knew.” That humble attitude continued in her inaugural teaching experiences, as she acknowledged “what kids might know […] that [she] didn’t know.” Even today, as a distinguished emeritus, Cindy empathizes with her students as fellow readers, feeling
their feelings about books and admitting when they have “helped [her] see” familiar stories in new and exciting ways.

Erik’s narrative also exudes humble empathy. He positions his students as the heroes in his story and admits he is still a professional work in progress even on the verge of retirement. His first foray into teacher research was born, in part, from his lack of confidence because he recognized admitting that was the first step toward fixing it. That experience had the added benefit of prompting his reflections on his students’ “transient lives” and impressive resiliency. Throughout his career, he has acknowledged his “advantages” and empathized with his students’ challenges, while at the same time cultivating “a community of learners” capable of advocating for social justice.

**Optimistic Leadership and Advocacy**

Ultimately, negative capability leads to acting on behalf of “the greater good” (Sagurthi & Thakur, 2016, p. 191) because playful curiosity, in conjunction with the humility and empathy stimulated by an expanded worldview, enables one to channel imagination into advocacy (Gundy, 2014; Hejinian, 2000; Hirsch, 2014; Wigod, 1952). For teacher researchers, critical awareness is an important step, and compassion is a necessary component, but action is truly key (Brookfield, 1993; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Jemal, 2017). Moreover, a tolerance for challenge and discomfort protects negatively capable people from “enervating cynicism” because they are “creative, positive, and hopeful” (Gundy, 2014, p. 467). Likewise, teacher researchers need the self-assurance and positive thinking to stay committed to their goal of more equitable and effective teaching and learning (Bray et al., 2000; van der Heijden et al., 2015). Above all, Ayers (2000) argues, “outstanding teachers need to question the common
sense—to break the rules, to become political” (p. 209), and teacher research, as self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1993), ably supports that aim.

Erik’s story illustrates his long-standing view of education as a way “to break the machine,” particularly in the alternative context about which he is so passionate. He expressed an early interest in wanting students to become “active citizens,” and his inquiry stance enables him to achieve that aim, whether by finding unique ways to provide “social capital,” inviting them to examine injustice with and alongside him, or simply sharing his experience of being a teacher on strike. Committed not just to their academic success, but also to their self-esteem, Erik works tirelessly on their behalf, attracting the attention of “the governor’s mansion.”

Cindy shares Erik’s passion for engaged citizenship, given her experience as an anti-war activist. She also demonstrates a commitment to working with struggling learners. After honing her leadership skills at the Chèche Konnen Center, she positively ached to get back in the classroom to use her knowledge on behalf of K-12 students. She also knows the importance of considering “the broader context,” going so far as to learn a new language when students’ test scores did not square with her perceptions. Speaking Creole helped her understand their needs and marshal the resources to meet them. Now, as a teacher educator, she can pass along that perspective while continuing to use “story as [a] weapon” at the K-12 level, fiercely advocating for all students.

Gail, too, consistently puts her “big voice” to use, whether by starting a school-based teacher research group, co-leading the entire district network, or serving as a teacher educator. Her humble service in the Marine Corps provided “an incredible experience in leadership,” which she consistently demonstrated throughout her career.
Even in retirement, she persists as a “teacher leader” and “advance[s] the philosophy of inquiry-based practice,” well beyond the schoolhouse walls. Indeed, Gail may be “an old liberal softy,” but she, like the others, is firm in her commitment to public education.

Crucially, all 3 narrators infuse their leadership and advocacy with optimism. Erik has not retired because he continues to enjoy “little successes every day,” just as he continues his efforts toward “changing the narrative” of alternative education. Even when faced with new challenges, he remains steadfast in his goal to “give it a shot and see what happens.” His job is demanding, but it is also “fun” and “exciting.” Gail and Cindy would no doubt agree. Gail stays focused on the “comedic aspects” of her career, even as she continues to fight for the value of inquiry and play in public education, and, indeed, for public education itself. Likewise, Cindy is a tireless advocate, who persists because of the “fun” she continues to have. Theirs is a political profession, but they manage to remember it is playful, too.

Coming full circle, then, these mini-narratives illustrate how the dimensions of negative capability—playful curiosity, critical awareness, a willingness to be disturbed, humble empathy, and optimistic leadership and advocacy—support a deeply embedded and enduring inquiry stance. While it is helpful to examine each disposition one at a time, it is also important to see such qualities as “closely related and mutually reinforcing” (van der Heijden et al., 2015, p. 696). In concert, these critical characteristics enable teacher researchers to shift from “formal and discrete inquiry plans” to a “daily classroom approach” (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 14). Gail describes inquiry as part of “the natural ebb and flow” of teaching, precisely because it is “an important part of life” and “will probably always be [her] way of being” because it is “so
much a part of [her].” She insists, “It’s just who I am.” Erik, too, sees inquiry as “natural and part of the process,” seizing everyday “teachable moments” and opportunities to learn. Cindy also celebrates her “habit” of inquiry, having learned to take that “stance” long ago. Whether at recess or when reading, whether as a teacher of record or a teacher educator, she “always wonder[s]” about and honors her students. For these long-term teacher researchers, the inquiry stance is truly a way of knowing and being. Whether it is innate or just developed early on, it persists, even past retirement and even in the Age of Accountability.

**Implications**

In the Age of Accountability, pre-service teachers may “wish to be told what to do,” yet true accountability cannot exist “without the cultivation of capacities for independent critical reflection and deliberation” (Carr & Skinner, 2009, p. 145). Gay and Kirkland (2003) associate accountability with being “self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one’s own teaching” (p. 181, emphasis mine). Teacher researchers, known for being self-aware, courageous, and cognizant of connections between their personal reflections and the larger sociopolitical world (Benade, 2015; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Schaenen et al., 2012), can take “fuller account” of themselves and their students (Pine, 2009, p. 25) than misguided metrics and market-driven neoliberal reforms. We need more of their kind, and we need them to persist in the profession.

The storied lives of Cindy, Gail, and Erik ably illustrate the dispositions of an inquiry stance in action, providing model narratives for pre-service teachers beginning to author their own professional lives (Olsen, 2008; Taylor, 2017). As historical mentors (Napolitan & Bowman, 2018), these 3 long-term teacher researchers offer a fuller “picture of the future profession” (van der Heijden et al., 2015, p. 697), and the
discussion of their mini-narratives highlights the powerful personality traits it takes to endure in a hostile sociopolitical climate.

This is not to suggest teacher candidates should walk the exact same walk. Indeed, despite their common characteristics, Cindy, Gail, and Erik are products of their unique “life circumstances” (Mustakova-Possardt, 2004, p. 246). Moreover, just as negative capability created the space within these long-term teacher researchers to be receptive to their students’ insights, teacher educators cannot expect to produce graduates who will challenge top-down reforms if they, themselves, issue top-down dicta. That is, teacher educators cannot deposit these dispositions within their students in “banking mode” (Darder, 2015, p. 110), and it would be the height of arrogance to presume pre-service teachers enroll in their programs totally devoid of these traits. Rather, given how inquiry-oriented teachers can engender inquiry-oriented students (Flessner & Klehr, 2016; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Jemal, 2017; Seider, Tamerat, Clark, & Soutter, 2017), teacher educators who hope to see curious, critically aware, challenge-seeking, humble, empathic, and optimistic leaders emerge from their programs must take a bold and honest look in the mirror, searching for similar traits.

True to the literary roots of negative capability and the power of story so prevalent in the lives of Cindy, Gail, and Erik, narrative is one means to that end. Teacher educators and their students can approach these mini-narratives as critical thinkers, consuming and deconstructing the texts (Lyle, 2013; Weber, 2010) before dabbling in autobiography as a form of professional learning. Especially “in this era of accountability” Adams (2017) argues for the value therein:

Beginning with one’s current knowledge, beliefs, and practice and then working backwards […] enables a deeper critical awareness. […]
Returning to one’s starting point, reconnected to past experience, teachers may see their professional lives differently and be better prepared to direct their next steps. (p. 168)

The next generation of teacher researchers—and the teacher educators who guide them—must author and reflect on their own stories, conscious of—but not constrained by—the examples provided here.

Indeed, constraints abound in the backdrop of these tales, and teachers’ environments impact both the extent to which they can act and their awareness that action is needed (Lazar, 2016; Lyle, 2013; Seider et al., 2017). The larger study of Cindy, Gail, and Erik examines the climates in which they have lived and learned. Here, it is worth noting their initial teacher education, as well as their own K-12 experiences, took place well before *No Child Left Behind*. Buchanan (2015) warns “fewer and fewer teachers” will be able to say the same, so attention to teacher identity development is critical in the Age of Accountability (p. 716). By taking the long view, this study emphasizes how understanding the dispositions of long-term teacher researchers is vital to ensuring future and lasting generations of educators with an inquiry stance.
CHAPTER 8
GO DEEP, GO WIDE, GO LONG: THE CONTEXTS AND CONSTRAINTS OF LONG-TERM TEACHER RESEARCHERS

More than a century ago, teacher and activist Margaret Haley (1904/2014) claimed the American public school lacked “the moral or financial support needed to enable it properly to perform its important function,” and the American public school teacher was “an automaton, a mere factory hand, whose duty it is to carry out mechanically and unquestioningly the ideas and orders of those clothed with the authority of position” (p. 211). Today, teachers around the world contend with “climates of constraint” (Fleet, De Gioia, & Patterson, 2016, p. 9), exacerbated by the global sweep of privatization and the proliferation of top-down accountability policies (Buchanan, 2015; Simpson et al., 2002). Haley would undoubtedly be concerned.

At the same time, she might celebrate educators who investigate how “local conditions, curriculum decisions, reform policies, and students themselves intimately influence the processes and impact of teaching and learning” (Klehr, 2012, p. 125). Teacher researchers, who systematically examine their own practice, do so in spite of or because of their contexts, authoring their own professional lives, rather than cowing to the authority of a factory model. As a form of self-directed learning, teacher research is a “politically charged Trojan horse,” provided teachers are not “so buried under the demands of their daily work that they have neither the time, energy, nor inclination” (Brookfield, 1993, pp. 237, 240). Those resources themselves “are essentially political in nature” (p. 233), and they are hard to come by in the Age of Accountability.

Scholars disagree about when that age began, some going all the way back to the Cold War, when learning in America became mechanized for national security (Wong, 2015, para. 18). This longer view revises the A Nation at Risk narrative (Garte,
which positions Reagan-era back-to-basics policies as a challenge to efforts in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s “to redress the inequitable power relationships in schools, and by extension in society” (Sugimoto & Carter, 2016, p. 21). Those same decades witnessed an increase in teacher-bashing, teacher-proofing, and teacher burnout (Farber, 1991). In other words, A Nation at Risk was not so much a drastic turning point as it was an escalation. Today, the steady march of neoliberalism continues to defund and delimit public institutions (Ott, 2018), yet Buchanan (2015) explains how each teacher’s “prior experiences” and “local school site” mediate the demands of accountability (p. 714). In spite of efforts to standardize and control the so-called business of teaching and learning, teachers—and especially teacher researchers—are socially situated agentic individuals capable of fighting back.

Teacher research values teaching as “an intellectual, constructivist act” (Klehr, 2012, p. 126). Looking beyond “traditional measures,” teacher researchers with an inquiry stance cultivate and maintain their students’ curiosity (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 15). Though teacher research helps individual teachers get better at what they do, the ultimate goal is to benefit their students, and by extension, the communities they serve. This is an inspiring idea, but Klehr (2009) is cautiously optimistic about the grassroots nature of teacher research “in this accountability-anxious and standards-driven phase of public education,” wherein “making it anything less than voluntary, and scripting it from above—even in the name of empowerment—would deal a lethal blow to its integrity” (pp. 67-68). Teacher educators who wish to support and spread teacher research should carefully consider both this dilemma and the incessant encroachment of
neoliberal accountability. In short, there is a dire need to understand the environments that foster and frustrate capable and committed teacher researchers.

This study took up that charge by examining the contexts and constraints of long-term inquirers, asking: What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? After providing relevant background information on teacher research and inquiry as stance and reviewing the methodology guiding this study, this article presents the insights of 3 long-term teacher researchers, derived through oral history interviews, on their professional contexts and constraints. Ultimately, this article offers implications for teachers and teacher educators who hope to see teacher researchers—and teacher research—go deep, go wide, and go long.

**Literature Review**

Teacher research is a global phenomenon, the American versions of which date back at least a century (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Klehr, 2009). While different contexts have given rise to a number of variants, among them practitioner inquiry and action research, the core philosophy stems from John Dewey’s belief in and value of teachers’ practical knowledge. Like Margaret Haley, Dewey resisted the factory model of education, preferring to see “schools as the birthplace of a more functional, more egalitarian democracy” (Garte, 2017, p. 8). This progressive vision requires educators “capable of and committed to doing far more than the traditional job description requires,” including tapping into “the larger cultural and historical contexts of their lives” (pp. 14-15). Though Garte does not explicitly mention teacher research, Klehr (2012) cites how teacher researchers’ questions evolve in response to “shifting events in the broader political landscape of schools” (p. 123).
Whereas a number of scholars suggest the Age of Accountability is a hostile climate for inquiry (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001; Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015), Stephen Corey (1953) long ago described “conditions favorable to action research,” including “an appreciable degree of freedom,” supportive and encouraging administrators, open dialogue, opportunities for “creative invention,” respect for evidence, and sufficient time and resources (pp. 86-87, 91). As the practice has evolved to encompass social justice aims, proponents stress the need for a supportive school culture (Hahs-Vaughn & Yanowitz, 2009; Lytle, 1996; Schaenen et al., 2012; Stevenson, 1995). Bradley-Levine (2012), for example, argues, “structures within schools that support teacher reflection and dialogue” can foster a more democratic atmosphere and “give voice to marginalized students, families, and teachers” (pp. 751, 769). Snow-Gerono (2003) describes a “reculturing” process that offers “great potential for teacher inquiry to effect lasting change in classrooms and school cultures” (pp. 2, 4), and vivid testimonies from inquiry-rich environments bear this out (Dana & Currin, 2017). Thus, teacher research is both shaped by and shapes the contexts in which it takes place.

In any era, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) insist, “there are no obvious and simple ways to create the conditions that support teacher research and, in fact, there are major obstacles” (p. 298). The decades-long conversation about the contexts that help and hinder teacher research continues, in part, because teacher educators continue to introduce new pre- and in-service teachers to formal teacher research. By intentionally incorporating authentic opportunities for inquiry, teacher preparation programs—and even district-level induction programs—can convey how teacher researchers fulfill two simultaneous, powerful, and mutually reinforcing roles, hopefully
cultivating “a career-long habit” (Bower-Phipps et al., 2016, p. 11). The intentionality is key, as leaders must consider the extent to which they are merely providing opportunities or mandating them.

Like Klehr (2009), Schulte and Klipfel (2016) express concern for the “integrity” of the “organic, practitioner-centered action research process that should ideally be shaped from the inside out” (pp. 457-458). Examining the impact of external forces on pre-service teachers just starting with inquiry, they cite typical culprits—time constraints of the K-12 schedule or the esoteric logistics of obtaining IRB approval—in addition to university expectations and even the influence of mentor teachers. In some respects, they admit, pre-service teachers are shielded from pressures facing full-time educators, but teacher educators must nevertheless “mitigate the forces that may otherwise inhibit teacher candidates from reflecting on their own learning” (p. 465). Others echo their view, insisting, “the context of a preservice teacher is one of limited agency by default,” and constraints do not entirely dissipate within the first year of teaching (Dodman et al., 2017, p. 32). Indeed, even in-service teachers may need specific structural supports to engage in teacher research, such as a suggested plan or framework, which makes research less abstract, or opportunities to network with other inquirers, which challenge them to “clarify intentions, identify real outcomes, and make adjustments” (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 15). Such features require skilled facilitators or mentors (Bradley-Levine, 2012; Krell & Dana, 2012) who can balance autonomy and support.

In the best-case scenario, teacher researchers are supported by critical friends. Self-reflection is obviously possible as a solitary pursuit, but others can stimulate the imagination towards “new ways of being, thinking, believing, and acting” (Buchanan,
The goal of “frequent and ongoing collaboration” is by no means “a collective, unified view,” as it is imperative teacher researchers are free to follow their unique interests and design their research projects accordingly (Klehr, 2009, p. 34). Multiple perspectives play an important role in moving those projects forward. Consequently, where supportive structures and/or incentives are in place, collaboration can maximize the professional development benefits of teacher research, ultimately enhancing the benefit to students (Clayton et al. 2017; Rust & Meyers, 2007). Fulmer and Bodner (2017) claim, “participation in a tenable teacher inquiry network is perhaps the greatest resource” for new teachers to develop habits of “critical reflection” and “become agents of change” (pp. 10-11). While other scholars readily concur (Meyers, Paul, Kirkland, & Dana, 2009), formal conferences or even informal networking events can be time- or cost-prohibitive and therefore available to a limited number of teacher researchers, let alone teachers (Klehr, 2009).

In addition to external constraints, the endurance of teacher research often depends on the internal impact of sociopolitical features. Anderson and Herr (1999), for instance, suggest, “institutional structures and politics will, to some extent, determine the epistemological stances that can be safely advanced” (p. 12). More recently, Taylor (2017) argues, teachers who identify and act as teacher researchers “often do so in conflict with local and national educational policies that limit their agency and professional decision-making” (p. 24). Lone inquirers in hostile school environments are particularly prone to backlash if they appear “too confident, ambitious, and knowledgeable” (White, 2011, p. 322). Institutional resistance can also arise if others fail to realize practitioner researchers produce knowledge in addition to rather than in lieu of
staying abreast of traditional education research (Odell, 1976; Schiera, 2014; So, 2013). All of these elements can squelch inquirers’ morale and motivation. Moreover, Klehr (2009) wonders whether or not “teacher researchers are actually doing substantial reading across communities” (pp. 34-35), suspecting they may be especially unlikely to read research about teacher research.

Identifying as scholars in their own right can be daunting to novice inquirers, who may presume research requires facility with experimental design and statistics. These presuppositions are especially evident at the stage of coming up with a strong question (Katch, 2017; Rust & Meyers, 2007). For Rust and Meyers (2007), who encourage teachers to be “critical stakeholders in the educational policy debate,” these pressures manifest in teachers’ fearing “their questions are too pedestrian and too narrow to be worthy of policy implications beyond the immediate small world of their classrooms” (pp. 70, 80). In her work with early childhood majors, Katch (2017) cites “a ‘light-bulb’ moment when students realize they can ask questions about things they are actually already doing, and experiment with small tweaks to their practice” (p. 2). Moreover, they learn “inquiry is not only in service of finding answers” because so-called “failed research” can always be “fodder for our future pursuits” (p. 4). Long ago, Hymes (1980) urged fellow academics to view teachers as “partners in inquiry,” though he recognized teachers themselves might have to overcome feeling like “a legitimate contribution to knowledge […] required methodology and subject-matter disconnected from their experience” (p. 6). Because of the radical philosophy at the core of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Fiorentini & Crecci, 2015; Klehr, 2009; Schaenen et al., 1992), institutional features and sociopolitical contexts play a vital role.
Scholars have documented the local barriers and tough questions teacher researchers face to propose or invite immediate remedy (Isakson & Boody, 1993; Sardo-Brown et al., 1995), yet this study takes the long view of teachers “as researchers who have something to say about how children learn and how teachers teach” (Burnaford & Hobson, 2001, p. 235). Moreover, this study intentionally focuses on inquiry as stance—the construct coined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) to describe the ontological and epistemological disposition of teacher researchers. Even in times of turmoil, teacher researchers with an inquiry stance are “deliberative intellectuals” who ably grapple with “productive and generative tensions” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 2, 94). For them, “asking questions and seeking answers” becomes a continuous way of being (Dodman et al., 2017, p. 41). Storm (2016) extols the benefits of this disposition, gleaned from firsthand experience: “Instead of seeing my curriculum, pedagogy, and students as inert and unchangeable, approaching my work as a teacher researcher forces me to question what is happening in the classroom” and beyond (p. 58). Motivated “to intellectualize” and “re-professionalize” the practice of teaching, he works “to actively figure out what structural constraints may be getting in the way” (p. 58).

Teachers who distinguish themselves as experts have been known to engage in research, particularly as a way of “recognizing and overcoming the negative external influences on their teaching” (Bray et al., 2000, p. 77). When experts retire and gain emeritus status, the heightened autonomy enables them to “choose pathways that build upon their expertise and experience,” so they are “helping others while staying interested in their own learning” (Dagenais et al., 2000, p. 101). By exploring and
documenting the enduring inquiry stance of 3 long-term teacher researchers, this study adds to our understanding of these exceptional educators while also looking specifically at the sociopolitical and institutional contexts in and against which they work.

**Methodology**

Operating from a view of knowledge as socially constructed (Crotty, 1998), this study elicited insights from long-term teacher researchers regarding the evolving contexts continuing to shape and be shaped by their enduring inquiry stance. People and places are inextricably connected because identity and agency are socioculturally situated (Buchanan, 2015; Holland & Lave, 2009; Wortham, 2004). Thus, stories of “individual agency” also illuminate “the hidden history of policies and institutions,” which exist in a “social landscape” (Hall, 2005, pp. 1262-1263). Specifically, studies of teacher identity reveal “the teacher’s world is ever-changing and never-completed while simultaneously exhibiting eternal features” (Johnston, 2012, p. 4). Even if teachers “identify the locus of expectations within themselves,” society’s imprint is evident (Green & Manke, 2001, p. 47). Thus, this study centers on long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance, while at the same time investigating the contexts and constraints that foster and frustrate that agentic identity.

Those contexts and constraints are themselves historical (Hejinian, 2000; Lyle, 2013), so exploring “the creative agency” of long-term teacher researchers requires “a broad historical” view that is “also relentlessly local” (Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996, p. 22). Designed, therefore, as an oral history (Yow, 2005), this study looks at the backdrop of each individual narrator, as well as across their stories, where there is an unmistakable meta-narrative at work (Sugimoto & Carter, 2016; Wortham, 2004). Looking across narrative testimonies “intertwines the biographical bones of a particular
life” and offers “insight into how people make sense of their lives and social worlds, […] revealing as much about values and perceptions as about material realities” (Slim & Thompson, 1995, p. 141). My participants, as narrators who shared parallel professional life stories, provided interconnected insight in response to my research question: What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance?

Because of my participants’ centrality to the study design, I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to enlist 3 long-term teacher researchers retired from or currently working in public K-12 schools. First, I solicited nominations from scholars of teacher research. Next, I spoke briefly with each willing nominee to ensure they believed themselves to meet the criteria for the study before obtaining informed consent. Then, I conducted and transcribed 3 individual, semi-structured, phone interviews with each narrator (Seidman, 2006). Questions of “formation,” focused on “crucial life episodes,” yield insights about the influential contexts in a teacher’s life, whether “intrapersonal (existential), interpersonal, cultural (collective), practical, professional, institutional, [or] societal” (Butt et al., 1992, p. 62). My interview protocol, which covered participants’ journeys to teaching and teacher research, as well as their own understanding of their inquiry stance, sought such qualitative data.

To analyze the transcripts, I turned to the zoom model, which situates individual life histories within sociocultural contexts, given how individuals and society exist “in a relationship, intricately and intrinsically linked” (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 393). The macro-zoom level acknowledges this interplay, synthesizing multiple life histories for broader insights. At the interactional-zoom level, my participants, as oral history narrators and therefore co-interpreters, had a hand in this process (Yow, 2005). Pamphilon (1999)
notes, “the aged narrator knows the ‘end of the story’” and responds to interview questions accordingly, resulting in a “congruent” and often noticeably positive story (p. 394). Because of this—and because they were nominated as outstanding examples of teacher researchers, I use their real names throughout. Indeed, each participant’s community has been recognized for exemplary teacher research, which may be unsurprising given the nomination process that led me to them. Thus, I briefly introduce them and the places where they live, learn, and lead.

First, Cindy Ballenger, who hails from Massachusetts, was one of the early members of the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (BTRS), among a small set of groups with “rich histories of regular meetings” (Fulmer & Bodner, 2017, p. 10). The author of *Teaching Other People’s Children: Literacy and Learning in a Bilingual Classroom* (1999) and *Puzzling Moments, Teachable Moments: Practicing Teacher Research in Urban Classrooms* (2009), Cindy has a wealth of teacher research experience. In fact, she earned a doctorate in applied psycholinguistics from Boston University by writing a teacher research dissertation: *Language and Literacy in a Haitian Pre-School: A Perspective from Teacher-Research* (1994). She is technically retired, having worked with students in pre-K through the middle grades since the early ’80s, yet she continues to serve as a public school literacy specialist and as a teacher educator.

Next, Gail Ritchie, whose Northern Virginia district has been known “to effectively groom teacher leaders” via teacher research (Rust & Meyers, 2007, p. 83), lives up to that claim, having learned about teacher research as a pre-service teacher at George Mason University, where she ultimately earned a Ph.D. The title of her dissertation, *Teacher Research as a Habit of Mind* (2006), evinces her long-standing commitment to
inquiry as stance. Like Cindy, Gail is a retiree in name only: she launched her K-1 career in the early '90s, and after a stint in the district office and several years as a literacy coach, she now works as a consultant at a Title I school, where she continues to advocate for teacher research.

Finally, the Wisconsin district where Erik Shager continues to teach has proved fertile ground for teacher research, particularly for “achieving greater equity in educational outcomes for all students” (Caro-Bruce et al. 2007, p. x). This cause is dear to Erik, who has spent his entire career in alternative secondary education, beginning in the mid-'90s. Having learned about action research through the Madison Metropolitan School District, Erik went on to earn a master’s degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison after producing a teacher research thesis. One of his most extensive projects, “Been There, Done That: Student Inquiry about High School Dropouts” (2007) appears in Creating Equitable Classrooms through Action Research and attests to Erik’s fondness for engaging in collaborative and parallel inquiry with his students. At the time of this writing, both Erik’s teaching career and his inquiry stance are going strong.

For more information on these teacher researchers, readers are encouraged to access the larger study of which this article is a part. As a more comprehensive oral history, the larger study introduces Cindy, Gail, and Erik through extensive narrative portraits, whereas here, in light of the focus of this article, I concentrate specifically on their contexts and constraints. Below, I articulate and elaborate on the structural supports that have enabled these teacher researchers to endure.
Going Deep, Wide, and Long with Teacher Research

Through extensive conversations with Cindy, Gail, and Erik about their persistence as teacher researchers with an inquiry stance, the following themes emerged: 1) deep scholarly preparation and academic mentorship; 2) wide ongoing support, whether across the district or across the nation; and 3) long-standing relationships with like minds. To highlight the salience of these themes across their accounts, I weave illustrative data from all 3 narrators as I present my analysis below.

Deep Scholarly Preparation

All 3 narrators are true practitioner scholars, whose educational experiences throughout their lives have informed their teacher research.

Formative K-12 experiences. All 3 narrators exhibited intelligence and aptitude from a young age, which came alive in certain classrooms. Cindy’s early education in 1950s-‘60s suburban Chicago was “pretty good” in that it was “basically not boring.” After skipping a grade at her parents’ urging, she worried about competing with “sophisticated” classmates’ “brilliant” ideas, yet her freshman English teacher was “very welcoming of all kinds of contributions.” During a discussion of Homer’s Odyssey, Cindy offered a response to a question “that wasn’t in the mainstream” but “connect[ed] to real life,” and “he took it seriously.” She was “struck” to learn “you could say things from your ordinary knowledge,” a fertile foundation for the philosophy of teacher research.

Whereas Cindy stayed put for her childhood, Gail’s “army brat” years in the 1960s form “an important part of [her] story.” When the family moved to a New Orleans suburb, Gail was bussed to a newly integrated “junior high,” where the curriculum felt “like a repeat of what [she]d already had.” The next move, to Ft. Hood, Texas, brought with it a teacher who “just stood at the front” and “marched through the day,” which “was
incredibly uninteresting.” The family’s final transition was to Northern Virginia, where Gail’s high school offered students an enticing menu of courses. She fondly remembers her Shakespeare mini-course: “I liked that teacher so well that once I had her, I always would pick her instead of the topic.” She “used themes to unfold the curriculum,” deftly incorporating “required standards” and setting a powerful example for Gail’s future self.

Erik, likewise, was a “dutiful” K-12 student, who “always did well” and “got decent grades.” Having “always loved” social studies, he “tried to take the history of Wisconsin 3 times in high school,” though “there were never enough students to offer it.” He was able to enroll in AP history, undeterred by the rigor of having “to write an essay every week,” but his favorite teacher taught Psychology, crucial for “learn[ing] about people, how to get along with people, how to understand yourself.” This fostered Erik’s interest in identity—“who you are, where you’re going, and what you need to get there”—that continues to inform his teaching and research. As a high school teacher, Erik follows this teacher’s example: he “was funny” but also “made sense. He tried to […] connect to us as young people. […] He would challenge […] our thinking, and he was really cool.” Erik’s inquiry stance inspires him to be and do the same.

**Undergraduate majors in history.** None of the participants majored in education, although Erik very nearly did. An elementary school survey predicted his career as a social studies teacher, yet Erik was not all that certain about his future. One thing he did know was where he would go after high school: “It was pretty much assumed […] I would go to the college that was in our hometown,” to the point where his guidance counselors never discussed any alternatives. Erik sort of stumbled into the teacher preparation program at the local state college, thinking, “I’ll give education a
try,” yet it felt “weird” to conduct observations at his former junior high school. In contrast to his experiences in the history department, he “just didn’t like the classes” in education, so his advisor counseled him towards a degree in history.

Gail’s undergraduate trajectory also had a few curves. Though she thinks of herself as “sort of a natural-born teacher,” she initially envisioned a career in music and accepted an ROTC scholarship to Northwestern as a means to that end. She ended up with a “major in history,” expecting she would “have the Marine Corps send [her] to law school.” These experiences undoubtedly shaped her, but she did not enter a formal teacher preparation program until years later. Likewise, Cindy views teaching as a calling she initially failed to recognize. As an undergraduate at Barnard, she majored in history with a minor in Greek, feeding her longstanding curiosity in language with new knowledge from the emerging field of sociolinguistics. She openly considers herself a “humanities-educated person,” and her inquiry stance is rooted in that disciplinary soil.

**Winding but intentional paths to teacher education.** History degrees in hand, all 3 participants eventually enrolled in formal teacher education programs. When motherhood surfaced Gail’s “natural affinity” for children, she took a paraprofessional job at her “neighborhood school” and enrolled in a licensure program at George Mason, grateful for their “flexible” route. Although it was not easy to juggle work and school, I had this wonderful teacher that I was working with, and colleagues that were wonderful, and a principal, and my family, and friends, so supportive […] when I had to do my courses at night and they’d watch my kids for me.

Her most influential professor, Joan Isenberg, was an early childhood scholar whose “core belief […] is the value of play in learning.” Gail describes her as “a big believer in being proactive,” stressing how “you want to anticipate and plan for positive experiences
rather than waiting for something bad to happen.” Gail witnessed a plan for the positive in action when her program director—“a former school board member”—was comfortable with “bending the rules” so she could maintain her employment as a teacher’s assistant while completing her internship in the same teacher’s classroom.

As an intern, Gail benefited from George Mason’s Professional Development School (PDS) model. Though her mentor “was kind of old-school,” especially regarding “the need for teacher control,” Gail appreciated her “wealth of knowledge about how children learn and just the whole idea of lots of experiences and centers for kids to explore.” This period of her life was a true “apprenticeship,” full of valuable lessons “about classroom community and management” that provided a strong foundation from which she could launch her own career. She notes, “when I had my own classroom, I didn’t have the typical first-year teacher’s problems of management because I’d already been doing that for 3 years under the tutelage of a very experienced teacher.”

Like Gail, Cindy recognized her interest in children, which prompted her to work in a daycare. Though she struggled in the beginning, she soon connected with the Cambridge-Somerville Department of Mental Health, which piloted a program to bring a “clinical perspective” to early childhood education. Leaving the daycare to work for them meant being “where people really had some expertise and could share it.” Cindy followed their example by pursuing a master’s degree in early childhood special education, graduating in 1984 and effectively answering the once-ignored call to the classroom. She believes “connecting with the preschool unit was the crucial piece.”

Erik’s journey back to teacher education began when, after college, he moved to Madison and got a job at the campus bookstore. Free to read for pleasure, he “stumbled
across Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* and read that book a few times.” The powerful ethnography reignited Erik’s interest in teaching, so he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Right away, it was “the opposite experience” in that “It was tough to get in.” While completing the requisite coursework for licensure, Erik took a history of education class with prolific scholar Jurgen Herbst: “I was the last class he ever had.” Herbst had spent a professional lifetime contemplating the role of school in society and the potential to “break the machine,” which seemed “pretty cool” to Erik. In another course, Erik got a taste of action research when the professor shared a “social research project that she had done at a community center […], where she had students look at issues in their own community.” Erik, in turn, “talked with people […] in a tutoring program” where he worked and got a feel for interviewing, as well as “inquiry in education.” He liked the “anthropological” feel of it. With this sort of foundation, “when it came time to actually get out there and experience being in schools,” Erik was a student teacher at an alternative program called Work and Learn. After a successful internship, when a job opened up at their sister campus, he leapt at the opportunity.

**Advanced degrees.** Erik returned to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for a master’s degree, while maintaining full-time employment at Work and Learn. This presented some logistical challenges, but his advisor, Diana Hess, “made a point” to offer evening classes, “so that was just a blessing.” Diana’s courses were also practitioner-focused, modeling how to use “inquiry in the classroom […] at various levels.” Erik really appreciated how she incorporated “methods in the college class the same way you could use them in a high school classroom.” Diana, along with Ken Zeichner, assisted Erik with his thesis, which “took the form of action research.” He
studied “discussion in the classroom” and learned to make instruction “relevant” by connecting to students’ experiences and incorporating “moral questions.” Unapologetic about the “pay bump” benefit of an advanced degree, Erik also knew the experience would “make [him] a better teacher.” He says without hesitation, “The main reason I went was to be a better teacher, and I know I became a better teacher. I just know it.”

After earning her master’s degree, Cindy pursued a doctoral degree, as well, entering a program in applied psycholinguistics under the direction of Jim Gee, who encouraged her to attempt a teacher research dissertation. This was a radical concept in the early ’90s, such that Jim and his colleague, Cathy O’Connor, “ran interference with […] the powers at Boston University to get that through because it hadn’t been done there before.” Although Cindy had long been bringing her natural curiosity to bear on her everyday practice, her Ph.D. program formalized her approach and officially inducted her into the teacher research community. The degree itself, though “useful,” is less important to her than the valuable lessons she learned. In fact, she often omits those 3 letters after her name and insists, “Nobody calls me doctor.”

Gail shares Cindy’s sentiment, open to but never demanding the title of “Dr.” When she became Teacher of the Year at the turn of the century, after following her mentor Joan Isenberg’s advice to pursue National Board certification, Joan nudged her towards a Ph.D., suggesting it, too, would “open a lot of doors.” Joan naturally chaired Gail’s doctoral committee, yet Gail was also nurtured by professors “in [Joan’s] orbit,” who saw “the value of teachers being researchers.” Graduate school thus affirmed her habit of “noticing what’s going on in the classroom” while also cultivating a broader perspective. For her dissertation, rather than producing a teacher research study, she
explored “how people come to teacher research,” even beyond the United States, and discovered, “if you have a supportive framework, people are more likely to stick with it.” She loved “trying to make sense” of how to spread and sustain teacher research, and doing so within a scholarly community, she was “standing on the shoulders of giants.”

**Sustained academic mentorship.** Far and away the most influential piece of my participants’ deep scholarly preparation was the profound connection they established and maintained with powerhouse scholars. In Gail’s case, Joan Isenberg became her “brilliant” advisor at George Mason in 1991, and her “social constructivist” philosophy, which promoted being “much more open-ended and more facilitator than director of learning,” resonated with Gail’s emerging insights about teaching. She eagerly followed Joan’s advice to arrange “the space and the materials for kids to play and construct their own learning and then help them to make sense of that.” In fact, Joan started Gail “on the teacher researcher path,” assigning a project based on *Serious Players in the Primary Classroom* (Wassermann, 1990), which “advocated a framework of play, debrief, and replay.” Joan asked students “to take an aspect of [their internship] classroom and infuse play into it.” This was a “toe in the water” of teacher research, “a tiny, little whet-your-appetite experience” because Joan wanted them to “keep it super manageable,” but when Gail saw how “a tiny little change made such a powerful difference,” she was “hooked,” and she was also hooked on Joan. Gail claims, “Even though I’m retired and she’s retired, I still consider her my mentor.” In part, this is because “Whenever there was a professional crossroads or a decision to be made, she always gave me such excellent advice. […] She has never steered me wrong.”
Cindy also cherishes her deep roots in an academic family tree. From time to time, she still sees Sarah Michaels, who, during her Ph.D. program, guided her through the nuts and bolts of teacher research. Cindy shares, “We have fun because we’re both obsessed with transcripts,” since they show how kids “learn to talk themselves into an understanding.” Of course, of all the scholars she interacted with during her graduate study, it was Jim Gee who played a “really important” role in her life. His work is among “the most influential things” she has ever read, as she was awed by the parallels he drew between “African-American children telling stories” and ancient oral traditions. She remains deeply grateful for his mentorship during her protracted path to a Ph.D.

Similarly, as Erik’s thesis advisor, Diana Hess went above and beyond. He “really lucked out” to have been paired with such an extraordinary scholar of social studies education, “a fantastic, fantastic person [and] incredible teacher” who “reinforced” his inquiry stance by inspiring him to attempt parallel and collaborative inquiry with students, “teaching with and for inquiry.” She was an ideal person to “bounce ideas off” and offered “really good feedback,” support that extended past graduation. Diana, “now the dean of the School of Education,” remains a very important figure in Erik’s life, inviting him to “become part of grants” or sit on “panels” and share his insights.

**Wide Ongoing Support**

To make the most of their deep scholarly preparation, all 3 narrators readily embraced ongoing professional development. Their involvement in vast networks and participation in various conferences and initiatives demonstrates how teacher education—and teacher researcher education—is not confined to college campuses.

**Homegrown groups.** All 3 narrators willingly joined local teacher research groups. Gail, who already knew about teacher research, connected with her district’s
Teacher Researcher Network (TRN) to find out more. The TRN had a “framework” that provided “very important support,” owing to the leaders Gail affectionately refers to as the district’s “Founding Mothers of teacher research.” Their “typical model was to have a school-based group with somebody at the school leading the group,” but, lacking that option, Gail joined a “cross-district group,” offering “cross-pollination” and a safe space for her to voice and reflect on her colleagues’ concerns about transitioning to multi-age classrooms. Whereas they worried kindergarteners would experience less play in a K-1 environment, Gail “had taught first grade and had a very play-based classroom.”

Prior to linking up with the TRN, Gail “followed [her] own whims […] as a researcher” and “had never experienced […] a full year’s worth of research.” The group was thus “new and exciting,” which made her feel like a “full-fledged, genuine teacher researcher,” as opposed to doing a project for a course. Her “first formal research study” succeeded because the group helped her “make some difficult decisions in order to make the study as meaningful as possible,” steering her away from “way too broad of a question.” The group leader, a “masterful facilitator,” fostered an ideal environment: “We would arrange the desks in a circle. It was very important to her, […] and I’ve come to understand why because then, you know, everybody’s equal.” Gail appreciated the structured yet “low-key format,” wherein “each person would talk about what they were finding and ask for assistance with any challenges that they were experiencing, and then the rest of the group would support them.” She found herself wanting to “know how to lead one,” so the TRN co-leader offered to mentor her the following year. This was “a very gentle way to acquire the knowledge, […] instead of just being dumped in there and having to figure it out.” Her mentor was “explicit about kind of showing and telling,”
essentially “unpacking her actions” throughout “the cycle of a year.” Across the district, “leaders went once a month for networking and ongoing professional learning,” so in an apprenticeship much like her internship, Gail’s inquiry stance continued to grow.

For Cindy and Erik, local groups were primarily responsible for introducing them to formal teacher research. Like Gail, Erik found a “more formal, more structured” outlet for his natural, ongoing wonderings in a district-wide group he joined of his own accord, intrigued by an advertisement inviting him to “find out how [his] kids are learning.” The facilitators, two “veteran” teacher researchers, “let [them] struggle.” He explains, “They didn’t want it to be a cookie-cutter approach to doing research. There were certain things they wanted us to do, and there were certain suggestions they would make, but they did kind of leave it up to us.” In the process, he “learned how to be a good teacher researcher.” One of the most important lessons was the first: “it took a couple months” to come up with a strong question, “so it was manageable” yet conducive to collecting “multiple sources of data.” He turned to a kindergarten teacher for help. Her classroom served as a vocational placement for Work and Learn students—the “Work” in Work and Learn. She got him thinking about how “little kids wouldn’t see them as dropouts,” but rather just “grown-ups,” asking, “What do you think they get from” that experience?

Though Erik’s inaugural action research project and the group that gave rise to it required him to occasionally leave his class with a sub, which was not ideal, he can still “remember the people sitting around the table,” noting, “If that had been a disaster,” his teacher research trajectory “probably would have taken a different shape.” Instead, by “challenging [his] decisions” and “offering [him] suggestions,” they inspired him to keep going with teacher research, and he reports having “supportive environments on every
project” thereafter. Whenever he was part of an action research group, he felt “treated and trusted as a professional” to direct his own learning, knowing he “wasn’t working in isolation” because of the “other people who were doing research. We were talking about it […] and sharing our stories,” which he believes is essential for a project to “lead to a final product.” With that “outcome” in mind, he is more likely to think about “take-aways,” and with the authentic accountability a group can provide, he is more likely to “follow an action research protocol.” Otherwise, he admits, “you get a little lazy sometimes in your reflection,” and you might stop short of asking, “What really happens here?"

Erik’s biggest project engaged students as co-researchers, while he, acting as “kind of a facilitator” was simultaneously “researching their research.” What began as a “totally personal” project, for the sake of his own practice, became “something that […] some other young teacher or veteran teacher could use and learn from.” In fact, his action research group produced chapters for *Creating Equitable Classrooms through Action Research* (Caro-Bruce et al., 2007), so he “kept working with it, working with the data, [and] working with the findings.” That project really “sticks with [him] the most,” as he remembers having “a ton of support” during the data analysis phase, as well as “being interviewed” for the book’s introduction.

Cindy also flourished among fellow teacher researchers in her district. She joined the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar (BTRS) in the late 1980s, just as the group was getting its start. Initially, Sarah Michaels and Cathy O’Connor helped out as de facto teacher educators, but the largely self-directed group continued to meet, sometimes weekly, well into the ’90s. She attributes the longevity of the group to the fact that they really took their work seriously, right down to the snacks:
We didn’t bring crappy food, you know. A lot of times when you go to professional development, somebody brings Doritos or something, but we took turns, and we brought important food. [...] That was sort of a measure of how people felt about the group. When it was your turn, you tried to come up with something good.

During this “incredible period,” meetings had a communal, ritual quality, and members became friends who would occasionally “rent a house” during the summer to “go away and write.” Voluntary participation was key, especially because members had to be vulnerable. The group, by design, consisted of teachers across the district who “focused on admitting that something wasn’t working. [...] People felt like it might not be cool to do that with actual colleagues.” These days, most teachers are “not accustomed to the Brookline way of doing things,” which leaves her “having to kind of hunt” for that magic.

Inspired by the “great anthropologist” Del Hymes, who had issued “a kind of a call to teachers,” BTRS examined “the linguistic differences among their students as a source of who got privilege and who didn’t,” noting “the difference between the way they were responded to depending on the discourse style that they used.” Sarah Michaels encouraged them to share transcripts from their classrooms, and each member would take on the role of a student: “your job was to speak the lines of whatever kid and then to share what you thought that kid was thinking. So, you were kind of responsible for making sense of that kid.” They learned “huge amounts” about their students, but also, more broadly, “huge amounts about teaching,” especially the art of “turning something annoying into something interesting and something that could be researched.” As with Gail and Erik, then, participating in the local group made Cindy feel like a researcher.

**Conferences, big and small.** All 3 narrators attest to the role conferences played in maintaining their inquiry stance. Cindy attended the Penn Ethnography Forum in the late 1980s, one of the first years the conference featured a dedicated day for
teacher research. Simply “being around the anthropologists was just really rich,” since their discipline “keeps you, as they say, making the familiar strange” or “making things strange and curious.” Decades later, she can vividly recall presentations that taught her how in many contexts, from barbershops to emergency rooms, “there were patterns” that were both interesting in their own right and “connected to the communities” that gave rise to them. She still considers the Ethnography Forum “a very special place for teacher researchers” because of the opportunity to interact with ethnographers, anthropologists, and teacher research scholars like Susan Lytle, Marilyn Cochran-Smith, and Ken Zeichner. Attending as a novice teacher researcher was “huge,” according to Cindy: “we met a bunch of people and we had to create these real talks […], and that sort of got the whole thing rolling.”

For an introvert like Gail, presenting at a conference was a little more unsettling, but she embraced the challenge. Her district-level Teacher Researcher Network provided an annual opportunity for sharing, and she “got hooked” because “you could find out all these cool things that people did in their classrooms.” The network encouraged “different ways of sharing,” and the roundtable format was “a safe toe-in” because “it’s basically like a dining room table conversation.” Over time, Gail “got more comfortable,” whether co-presenting, leading a workshop, or eventually, daring to deliver the conference keynote. She was “pretty nervous” but “had so much fun with the creative piece of it.” Gail also connected with an international teacher research group that synced its meetings with those of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). People she encountered there—from Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada—ultimately became her dissertation participants.
Erik, too, has appreciated both attending and presenting at conferences, as well as summer programs, such as “NEH workshops, the Landmarks in American History workshops, and Gilder Lehrman seminars.” He especially enjoys sessions in which you “see practice or hear somebody talk about their practice,” and he bears that in mind whenever he is on the dais at the district, regional, or national level. Unfortunately, Wisconsin’s Act 10 cuts eliminated employees’ two contracted days for attending conferences, limiting professional development to “within the district.” While this gives Erik opportunities to talk about inquiry among local colleagues, it is striking to hear him say, “I haven’t been to an educational conference since…wow. It’s been a while.”

National networks. When budgets were healthier, teacher researchers had opportunities to connect across the country, not just at conferences. Both Gail and Erik were part of The Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI), which espoused a statehouse-to-schoolhouse philosophy by linking teacher researchers and guiding them to see how their work can impact policy (Rust & Meyers, 2007). As a member of TNLI, Gail got “to interact with teachers across the country […] and see how things unfolded in other areas.” In addition to meeting “fabulous people” in the network, who were “super thoughtful and intelligent,” as well as “social-justice oriented,” Gail also encountered Frances Rust, who, as “a long-time friend of Joan Isenberg’s, […] flew down from New York to attend [Gail’s] dissertation defense,” since she, too, contributed to Gail’s “development as a teacher and then as a teacher researcher.” Erik was also inspired by TNLI’s “national network of action researchers” and the assurance “there were other people across the country doing this.” TNLI got him thinking about the wider impact of inquiry: “their goal was to have what you’re doing, this action research, affect policy. […]
We had our own network, and we would publish our findings, and people would look at them, but […] this was a different thing.”

Participating in the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) also encouraged Erik to consider “action research […] on a bigger level.” Promoting a “constructivist” approach, wherein each classroom becomes “open and flexible, [and] the teacher becomes more of a facilitator than a director” (Accelerated Schools Center, 2002, para. 1, 6), the ASP network invited “cadres” of teachers to examine their school’s “challenge areas” through “an inquiry cycle,” in concert with groups from other schools. Erik found this “meshed nicely with classroom inquiry,” though it had more to do with “the big wheels that help keep the school running.” The core process was the same: “You look for possible solutions, you try something out, you reflect on it,” and ultimately, “you learn from whatever mistake you made or what went well” because you “discuss it with your teammates, and then you put together a plan.” Erik’s work with ASP led to “workshops at national conferences,” where he “share[d] action research projects” and talked about “using inquiry in the classroom.” He enjoyed talking audiences through “why do action research,” as well as how to use “the cycle of inquiry […] to improve practice.” In fact, he often invited his audience to “inquire and kind of analyze” in the midst of a session.

Financial incentives. Funding played a key role in all 3 teacher researchers’ stories, though financial incentives also appear to be largely a thing of the past. The BTRS that was so foundational for Cindy had support from the Mellon foundation, which, in addition to financing her eye-opening trip to the Penn Ethnography Forum, also provided group members with modest stipends. Similarly, Gail’s local Teacher Researcher Network acquired start-up funds “way back in the ’80s” and enjoyed robust
levels of support “through the 2000s,” although that is no longer the case. In addition to offering stipends for group leaders like Gail, the district also gave “paid release time,” which “was lovely because they funded 3 days per researcher, so most groups would break that into 6 half days, and that would carry you pretty much through the research year.” When the well ran dry, “some principals believed in it strongly enough to continue it and fund it on their own,” but they could only do so much in the Great Recession: “there are very few who are still doing it the way we did it back in the glory days.”

Erik’s district has also been vulnerable to budget cuts, which continue to attract national attention because of the Tea Party politics behind them (Strauss, 2018). Still, earlier in his career, he unquestionably benefited from funding above and beyond salary. As a graduate student, he and a teacher from a neighboring district designed “historical inquiry” projects using newly digitized materials from the Library of Congress, with grant support acquired with the help of mentor Diana Hess. Erik’s work with ASP also came about because his “administrator […] wrote a grant,” and Erik himself tried his hand at grant-writing to amass the funds needed to bring in an author he and his students had befriended to facilitate “a writing workshop for all of the students in the alternative programs,” which culminated in a student-generated anthology. He insists that would never have been possible without ample support from colleagues, administrators, and district leadership. Money matters, but people matter more.

**Long-Standing Relationships with Like Minds**

Over the course of their careers, all 3 narrators have cultivated invaluable connections with people who practice, promote, and protect teacher research.

**Administrative allies.** Given all her years of service, Cindy cannot deny the existence of “incompetent” administrators, but she feels fortunate to have worked with
individuals who defy that description. First and foremost is Sam Braun, director of the clinical nursery school where Cindy came into her own as a teacher. Sam was “a great child psychiatrist,” well educated yet “super grounded.” His “unconventional” approach to “traumatized” children made an indelible impression: “He took them seriously. He didn’t categorize them,” and he conveyed a fervent belief that if they “were asking for something, they probably needed it,” so it was the teachers’ responsibility “to figure out a way” to make it work. She recalls one 4-year-old who “seemed to want to be in small, enclosed places.” Sam simply “brought him a sleeping bag” so the child could “be at school and pay attention and do what he was supposed to do.” Because Sam “was always bending these rules,” working with him provided “the best learning environment […] because it wasn’t just theory and it wasn’t just practice. […] You could enjoy yourself and you could see that you were effective and you were learning all the time.” In fact, Cindy attributes the advent of her inquiry stance to Sam because she believes he had one of his own. He was, she recalls, “very insightful about the kinds of assumptions that middle-class people make about other people who aren’t so middle class, so we always took the kind of stance of inquiry towards what kids might know.” Working for and with Sam in a praxis-rich environment was “mind-opening.”

As Cindy transitioned from early childhood education to the world of K-12, she served under a number of administrators who focused on equity above and beyond quantitative measures. She has largely worked in schools that “aren’t super frustrating” and are conducive to teacher research because they are “very progressive-type” places that value “teacher autonomy,” in that “the principal was not a boss, and the district left us alone.” Thus, Cindy decided to retire when the teacher autonomy “just faded,” but in
her current work, the principal, “an old colleague,” is fully supportive of Cindy’s efforts to advocate for students, a sort of coming full circle to the Sam Braun method.

Like Cindy, Gail enjoys working with and for a former colleague in retirement, a principal who “believes in action research” and intentionally hires teachers with an “inquiry mindset.” Sensitive to the “bureaucratic stuff they have to do,” Gail feels called and capable when “administration wants [her] there and values [her] support.” She does not take that for granted, having clashed with an administrator just prior to retiring. She is profoundly grateful to have launched her career under Mary Agnes Garman, “an incredibly gifted woman,” who was “such a believer” and “such a learner,” who “had incredibly high standards, […] but she also had high standards for herself.” Once, Gail handed Mary Agnes the Wassermann (1990) book from Joan’s class:

I can’t believe I did this, but I think this was the naïveté of the 1st-year teacher. I said, ‘You might want to read this book before you come to observe because then you’ll understand the framework of my classroom,’ but you know what? She read it, and she loved it, and she got a copy for every teacher in our building.

Though Gail “can’t imagine doing that with any of [her] subsequent principals,” working with a “wonderful, brilliant learner of a principal,” who “was also very inquiry-minded,” gave her “freedom to do things.” She could “follow the children’s lead,” as well as her own inclinations. When, for example, she wanted to start a teacher research group at the school, Mary Agnes readily approved: “She let me leave for a half-day once a month and go over to another school and be part of the teacher researcher group” in preparation to serve as a group leader the following year.

Erik, too, has benefited from administrators who have affirmed his natural curiosity and given him both autonomy and support. He was hired by a principal who also happened to have been “part of the founders of the school.” Rather than mandating
the status quo, however, he suggested the school needed “to change things up” in response to an evolving student population, offering Erik the freedom “to kind of figure out what that would look like” by “try[ing] out a lot of things.” That meant a lot to Erik when he was just getting started, and the “administration in general” has been, “even to this day, very supportive of teachers, very supportive of students and figuring out the best way for students to succeed.” After some restructuring, Erik noticed an increase in the “layers of administration,” including an uptick in visits from “administrators and assistant superintendents.” Whereas classroom visits used to be fairly rare and generally for the purpose of evaluation, he cites an increase in “walk-throughs” as evidence of a commitment to the district’s “equity vision.” He explains, “If you’re talking equity, then you’ve got to make sure that those schools that are serving kids that have been underserved are getting all the tools.” In other words, although “oversight” can sometimes be a challenge, Erik chooses to see this as a change “for the better.”

**Colleagues and critical friends.** The lives of all 3 narrators illustrate the importance of within-school support for teacher research, whether overt or implicit. From the beginning, Gail developed as a teacher within “an extraordinary community,” and in contrast to the others, she has a rich history of conducting teacher research with and alongside colleagues. She finds a teacher research group to be “more powerful when it’s on-site in your building because those are your colleagues, and you see them every day, so you get that in-between times contact as well.” Someone across the hall becomes “a partner teacher to talk things over with and try things out across our classrooms.” When she and a colleague anticipated having “to frame [their] math instruction through a workshop format,” rather than dread the inevitable or criticize the
unknown, they opted to “have a go with it” and gain “a better sense of what worked and what didn’t work” well before “the required stuff got imposed.” Their two-year study incorporated “harder, […] more quantitative data” from individual pre- and post-assessments, and they also enlisted an early childhood scholar as a co-researcher, enjoying the “praxis” that emerged from this “partnership between reality and theory.”

Even in retirement, Gail enjoys being among “like-minded colleagues” who take an inquiry stance towards their practice. Citing *The Life Cycle of the Career Teacher* (Steffy et al., 2000), she is a proud “emeritus” with a new sense of purpose.

Although Erik has never conducted action research with other teachers at school, from the beginning of his career, he felt comfortable bouncing ideas off of people at work: “just run it by a colleague in the office and see what they think.” At Work and Learn, a team of 4 teachers guided each cohort of about 15 students, and Erik recalls,

> We talked every day because we were in the same office every day. We had before-school time, middle of the day, and after-school time where we could talk. […] It was such a great way […] to reflect and to learn from each other and learn about the students that we had, and we became a real tight-knit group.

In his early years, his colleagues “were veteran alternative ed. teachers,” who encouraged his innovative assignments: “If I said, ‘Hey, students want to come in and ask some questions of your class, would you be willing to do this?’ They were all for it.” He warmly describes “the community that had been built by the teachers.”

Cindy also praises the “excellent colleagues” she has had over the years, especially during a decade-long stint as a reading specialist and science teacher at a teacher-created school in Cambridge. The collegial atmosphere made for “such a great school,” where “people developed the most amazing curriculum.” Additionally, Cindy is “always looking for teachers” to recreate the BTRS, even sharing a “funny” classroom
story with the school secretary “or others not directly involved” because “you just never know who’s going to tell you something” that might help with ongoing wonderings. One reason she records her questions is because “sharing it with someone else is how it really turns into a broader thing,” which is, in turn, more likely to have a positive impact on student learning. Once, she and some colleagues took an interest in a student destined for “a separate class” in high school, “because his IQ was low, and […] he was pretty low on most measures.” They all “took on an inquiry approach,” and “everybody would tell stories about what he was doing […] in their class” as a way to “discuss what was going on.” In the end, not only did the student avoid “the separate classroom,” but he also “gained some confidence.” For all 3 narrators, talking with colleagues about teaching and learning improves their confidence, too. Indeed, in addition to teachers and teacher researchers, they truly are teacher leaders.

Opportunities to lead. All 3 narrators have worked with pre-service teachers, which reinforces their own learning. Erik’s interns were “a big help” during action research projects, because “it’s one more person you can talk to. […] You got somebody else in the classroom, and they can point out something.” Offering “another way to gather information,” interns gave Erik a deeper understanding of his own practice while at the same time launching their own careers with an “inquiry mindset.” Even when he does not have an intern, because of his “connection to the university,” he is often asked, “Could we observe one of your classes?” He gladly agrees.

Similarly, Gail enjoyed being able to give back to the PDS model that facilitated her early development as a teacher. Serving as a mentor, she inquired with and alongside interns: “they could become co-researchers and help with data collection or
[…] just by virtue of the conversations we had, develop an inquiry stance of their own.” In addition, she began working as an adjunct teacher educator in the late ’90s, guiding pre-service teachers as “they embarked on a research project.” When an accreditation visit prompted stricter standards, “schools were really cracking down, and they wanted their adjunct faculty to have doctorates.” Fortunately, Gail was a practitioner scholar with the doctorate to prove it.

Like Gail, Cindy has extensive experience as a university-based teacher educator. At first, this meant “having to figure out what [she] knew so [she] could tell other people.” Now, she delights in guiding novice teachers through inquiry, yet she is skeptical of some efforts to cultivate a lifelong inquiry stance, suggesting, “It’s nice that they’re required in a whole range of programs, some sort of teacher research project, but […] I don’t get the sense that it sticks.” Because Cindy, Gail, and Erik have an inquiry stance, thanks in large part to the contexts in which they have worked, teacher research has long been and continues to be an integral part of their professional lives, even in the Age of Accountability.

**Discussion: Inquiring in the Age of Accountability**

The research question driving this study was: What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance? As can be expected of older narrators (Pamphilon, 1999), Cindy, Gail, and Erik overwhelmingly focused on the positive, though they are not entirely impervious to the sociopolitical features of the Age of Accountability. As expert educators, they have been able to mitigate negative external forces in their professional lives (Bray et al., 2000), yet neoliberal policies promoting standardization and performance conspicuously intrude on these otherwise happy tales.
Cindy’s decision to retire coincided with the period when Cambridge schools “became test-obsessed,” as she grew frustrated by “how much people were concerned about test scores.” From her vantage as an active emeritus, she questions “all those objectives that people have to write up now,” dubious of preemptive efforts to account for every moment of instruction. No longer a teacher of record, she nevertheless empathizes with younger generations of teachers, who “don’t have time” for something like BTRS because they are already beset by so many meetings and demands. In her work as a teacher educator, she finds, “It’s become much more problematic to be doing research in schools […] because everybody’s so paranoid and insane.” She and the teachers she mentors “fly as low as [they] possibly can below the radar” because “the sort of IRB thing has totally backfired,” constraining “simple, for your own practice but you might want to share it with some people, teacher stuff. […] It’s just made it much too cumbersome, and […] that’s a terrible, terrible thing.”

Gail shares Cindy’s concern for the endurance of teacher research, claiming, “once the accountability movement really got underway,” the climate discouraged “classroom-based research” in favor of “dump[ing] knowledge into kids’ heads to get good scores […] as opposed to listening to us about the practices that would really increase student knowledge, which would probably result in higher scores.” Like Cindy, Gail, as an emeritus, is “fortunate” to have escaped the brunt of the era, but she fears for the survival of “play-based kindergarten.” As a consultant and a grandparent, she sees “a lot of sitting at tables” and “time-consuming” tests: “They plug the kids into a computer […] 3 times a year in all grades. […] As a teacher that would have bothered me because I did my own one-on-one assessments with my students.” Gail is skeptical
that a computer can determine “what a student knows and can do rather than you actually sitting with the student and seeing personally what the kid can do.” The prospect of relying solely “on a machine instead of a knowledgeable professional” is “troubling,” right down to the automated report card comments.

Erik is still fully employed, and happily so, although he has definitely had to navigate some organizational changes, requiring “a lot of time […] with teacher teams,” yet devoted to “bigger structural issues, alignment issues across the district,” including a more standardized curriculum. It is as though the “district is being run […] almost like a corporation,” replete with “a stronger organizational structure.” This can have a “top-down” vibe, such as the push to align with his alternative school’s “sister campus.” At the beginning of his career, being part of a team “was like, 'I'm thinking of doing this. What do you think?'” Now, Erik teams “with somebody who’s on the other side of town,” and they stick close to “the curriculum” in order “to mirror each other.”

Erik is at least content to team with a colleague in alternative ed., rather than aligning with a mainstream teacher. He believes small cohorts of “15 students or 30 students” make for a “unique situation […] with more opportunities to do action research” because “getting to know students” is easier, as opposed to “the hustle and bustle of a big high school,” where you might be “teaching 100 or whatever students.” As a parent, he noticed the onslaught of standardized testing in traditional schools, but in alternative education, “it was always there.” Students working on credit recovery obviously had to undergo a fair amount of testing, but as a teacher researcher, Erik recognized the value of “good, authentic data.” For example, administering a test that is “kind of an entry point into the classes at the community college” allowed teachers “to
gauge where [students] are” and tailor their instruction accordingly. In other words, Erik can apply his inquiry stance towards the features of the Age of Accountability, rather than accepting data, policies, and procedures without question.

That Cindy, Gail, and Erik espouse nostalgia for the “glory days” on some level tells us they want to see teacher research continue not for their own sake, but for future generations of teachers. This is especially clear in their work with interns, but also in their recognition of the value of wider networks, as in Erik’s belief that his book chapter is “something that […] some other young teacher or veteran teacher could use and learn from.” People—fellow characters in their narratives—got them to that point by enabling them to see who they are: intellectuals with deep scholarly preparation, professionals who seek wide ongoing support, and critical friends who cultivate and cherish long-standing relationships with like minds.

Thus, the stories of all 3 narrators, which underscore the sociopolitical and institutional features that promote and inhibit inquiry as stance, ultimately illustrate how structures are peopled. Funding incentives, conferences, dedicated time for participation in teacher research groups, and opportunities to mentor and be mentored are all conducive to teacher research, but it is the people who provide those elements that matter. Without Sam Braun, Jim Gee, Cathy O’Connor, Sarah Michaels, Joan Isenberg, Mary Agnes Garman, “the Founding Mothers,” Frances Rust, Diana Hess, Jurgen Herbst, and countless others, Cindy, Gail, and Erik would not be the long-term teacher researchers they are, continually improving their practice—even in retirement—to serve students in American public schools.
Implications

When Hymes (1977) formulated the call that attracted Cindy and her BTRS peers to teacher research, he longed to see “teachers as participants in [an] ethnographic study,” which inherently views life as “prestructured by the history and ways of those among whom one inquires” (pp. 170-171). Educational research, he insisted, needed an anthropological perspective to foster the “democratization of knowledge” and move the discussion towards more lasting and “constructive change” because “the longer view seems a surer footing” (pp. 3, 5). By taking the long view, and inviting participants to do the same, this study of long-term teacher researchers identified the contexts that contributed to and supported their inquiry stance. To be sure, those contexts were—and still are—institutional, but the people within them planted seeds and enabled Cindy, Gail, and Erik to do the same.

While it has long been clear teacher researchers need “ample opportunity” to inquire in accordance with their own unique needs (Klehr, 2012, p. 127), and while existing scholarship has established that school- and district-wide cultures of inquiry do not appear overnight (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014), less has been said about the long-term, far-reaching efforts of individuals who play influential roles in the lives of teacher researchers. This study fills that void.

Especially in the Age of Accountability, when teachers face mounting obstacles and seemingly intractable constraints, the perspectives of long-term teacher researchers, including their sense of how they came to be, hold tremendous value. By virtue of what teacher researchers do, they are inherently attuned to conditions in schools (Klehr, 2012). Listening to and learning from them can point us toward how to
make those conditions better, so that more teachers can experience the deep, wide, and ongoing support so vital to these narrators’ identities.

In terms of deep scholarly preparation, teacher educators should invite pre-service teachers to articulate and analyze their formative K-12 experiences, looking for any and all roots of an inquiry stance. The extended oral histories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik, found in the larger study of which this article is a part, can position them as historical mentors (Napolitan & Bowman, 2018) by offering model narratives. Further, teacher education programs must consider the extent to which they encourage deep disciplinary exploration. While future teachers need not major in history, as all 3 narrators did, teacher educators can nevertheless ensure their programs provide strong coursework in the historical foundations of education. From foundation to capstone and beyond, teacher preparation should encourage historical thinking (Currin & Schroeder, 2018) and invite students to think of themselves as scholars. Whether or not graduates pursue advanced degrees, teacher educators should maintain a vested interest in their students, forging and sustaining the kinds of connections Cindy, Gail, and Erik credit for their ongoing inquiry stance. Where the business of educating tomorrow’s teachers falls overwhelmingly to adjuncts and graduate students, deep scholarly preparation may be hard to come by.

As for wide ongoing support, teacher educators can and should endeavor to grow the sort of groups that feature so prominently in all 3 narrators’ stories. At the very least, they can inspire pre-service teachers to start their own groups, again turning to the model narratives of Cindy, Gail, and Erik. In particular, Gail sets a strong example for the value of apprenticeship, a concept worth exploring with pre-service teachers.
Further, consistent with the value of deep scholarly preparation, teacher educators must subsidize, incentivize, or at the very least advertise the conferences and other networking opportunities available to pre-service teachers, especially those that support and promote teacher research. Though Rust and Meyers (2007) are skeptical of “the proliferation of ‘spots’” where “teacher researchers are essentially ‘preaching to the choir’” (p. 70), Cindy and Gail, in particular, valued and grew from such opportunities.

Finally, teacher educators must encourage their students to cultivate long-standing relationships with like minds. Again, the model narratives of Cindy, Gail, and Erik offer instructive examples of teachers who engage their administrators, peers, and interns in the collective project of more effective and equitable teaching and learning. Do teacher educators provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to build those skills? Do their programs present professional development as a collaborative endeavor or an individual’s isolated acquisition of requisite competencies? Do teacher educators model collaboration through fruitful relationships with their colleagues in educational leadership programs? Might their students—pre-service teachers and pre-service principals—have opportunities to interact? Are pre-service teachers afforded any opportunities to lead, or are they—as their enduring label implies—relegated to the role of trainee?

While the stories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik may not answer all of our questions, they certainly invite teacher educators to consider the extent to which we are providing the ways and means to cultivate long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance. It bears repeating, “there are no obvious and simple ways to create the conditions that support teacher research and, in fact, there are major obstacles” (Cochran-Smith &
Lytle, 1992, p. 298), yet like Klehr (2009), I, too, feel a responsibility to “advocate for the kind of research conditions that honor teachers’ capacity to inquire thoughtfully and productively into their own practice and on their own terms” (pp. 3-4). That is, while we have long known teacher researchers require autonomy, supportive administration, critical friendships, and sufficient time and resources (Corey, 1953), we need to critically examine both our efforts to ensure teachers have those conditions and the extent to which we invite them to self-advocate.

Klehr (2009) wisely insists teacher research is not “a panacea,” while nevertheless urging us to see inquiry-conducive contexts as a “right” (p. 4). As such, deep scholarly preparation, wide ongoing support, and long-standing relationships with like minds are worth fighting for. We must take up that cause, and we must inspire our students to do the same. In so doing, we can truly mitigate Margaret Haley’s (1904/2014) century-old concerns about “courses of study, regulations and equipment which the teachers have had no voice in selecting, which often have no relation to the children’s needs, and which prove a hindrance instead of a help in teaching” (p. 212). As long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance, Cindy, Gail, and Erik benefitted from the people in their lives who actively provided the support they needed and likewise removed the barriers they did not. By learning from these examples, we can work to ensure future teacher researchers can go deep, go wide, and go long.
CHAPTER 9
IMPLICATIONS AND INCLINATIONS

This dissertation explored and documented the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of Accountability affecting American public schools. Specifically, this study asked: 1) What dispositions enable educators to maintain an inquiry stance? and 2) What sociopolitical and/or institutional features promote and inhibit inquiry as stance?

Chapters 1 and 2 provided background on the Age of Accountability, underscoring the need to explore such questions in an era fraught with neoliberal education reforms that “purportedly quantify and measure the effectiveness of teachers and schools” (Paton, 2014, para. 14). Such top-down mandates, which ultimately work to privatize schools and deprofessionalize educators, are part of “America’s propensity across its educational history to ‘fix’ education by ‘fixing’ teachers” (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016, p. 4). This trend continues even with an alleged proponent of local control at the helm of the Department of Education (Green, 2018), such that teaching has become “a very difficult profession to want to enter or persist with” (Downey, 2018, para. 8).

Nevertheless, inquiry endures.

Given this context, Chapter 2 recounted the history of teacher research and the emergence of the inquiry stance construct, suggesting long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance, by virtue of their situated, agentic identities, might pose a formidable threat to the neoliberal, high-stakes status quo. In one interview, Cindy explained how “story” can serve as a “weapon” in this fight, echoing her remarks on the back of Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) Inquiry as Stance, where she described the philosophy of practitioner inquiry as “a major counter to the contemporary emphasis on
testing and packaged curricula” (emphasis mine). Because identity itself is storied (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), the very lives of long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance, considering who they are and how they see the world, also serve as counter-narratives.

Operating from this premise, Chapter 3 elucidated the methodological decisions guiding this study, intentionally designed so as to elicit and examine long-term teacher researchers’ insights about the characteristics and contexts that gave rise to and continue to maintain their inquiry stance. Combining Seidman’s (2006) model of in-depth qualitative interviews with the principles of oral history (Yow, 2005), the methodology embraced how “ordinary people live extraordinary lives and these ‘little’ histories are both shaped by, and shapers of, the ‘big’ history” (High, 2018, p. 39). Indeed, scholars suggest “it is inappropriate to regard life stories primarily as idiosyncratic,” as they are necessarily “embedded in social relationships and structures” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 3). Taking an inside-outside view—as this study does, with help from the zoom model of analysis (Pamphilon, 1999)—acknowledges that vital overlap.

Long-term teacher researchers—and the insights arising from their continual and systematic examination of their own practice—offer more authentic accounts of teaching and learning than the high-stakes standardized tests prescribed by accountability policies could ever hope to do because stories are so much more than “mere numbers” (Probst, 2001, p. 53). Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which shared the professional life stories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik, bear this out. Each extensive narrative portrait conveyed an individual participant’s journey to teaching and teacher research, illustrating both the dispositions and structural supports contributing to their inquiry stance, while also
documenting the encroachment of accountability policies and other constraints posing a considerable threat to teacher research and to teachers writ large. While each narrative yielded abundant insight on its own, looking across the narratives, as Chapters 7 and 8 did, wove individual “strands of memory” into a coherent and meaningful whole (Slim & Thompson, 1995, p. 141).

Honoring the inside-outside nature of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), Chapter 7 dove inward, identifying and discussing what makes these teacher researchers tick, while Chapter 8 focused on their surroundings, ultimately surfacing the people within those places who contributed so extensively to their enduring teacher researcher identities. In accordance with the zoom model of analysis (Pamphilon, 1999), the inside-focused Chapter 7, which surfaced insights from the meso and micro levels, was also a product of the interactional-zoom level. My participants were able to speak to their own habits, traits, and dispositions, but I, too, identified significant characteristics both within the stories they told, as well as in the telling. My reactions to their narratives inevitably influenced how I storied and re-storied their inquiry stance. Chapter 8, meanwhile, adopted a macro-zoom perspective, nevertheless influenced by my interaction with each narrator. My participants easily pointed to the external forces and features in their lives that have made them who they are today, yet I, as principal investigator, ultimately connected the dots.

In this final chapter, too, my analytical hand is evident, as I “move beyond the [...] macro and micro levels of analysis [...] to focus on the connections linking them” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 3). Bringing closure to the dissertation as a whole, I consider the implications raised by the abundant data supporting both of my research questions
and how those questions intersect. More importantly, I am mindful that “the people to whom our stories are told, as well as those who tell stories about us, may be tacit co-authors of our own designated identities” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 18). Throughout this dissertation, I have taken this very seriously, in wholehearted agreement that “stories will save us, if anything will,” provided we “read them responsively and responsibly” (Probst, 2001, pp. 50, 53). Here, by articulating implications for teachers, teacher educators, and historians of education, I ask my readers to heed this advice.

**Implications**

Collectively, the stories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik highlight the endurance of inquiry as stance, not only as a philosophical construct, but also in the lives of 3 extraordinary yet emulate-able educators. Indeed, oral history should ideally be much more than “a purely archival or voyeuristic pursuit, or an exercise in knowledge extraction” (Slim & Thompson, 1995, p. 2), yet the meaning of a storied life depends, in part, on the reader (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Unknowingly mirroring the push and pull of the inquiry stance, Slim and Thompson (1995) urge oral historians to consider “two kinds of audience: the ‘outside’ audience […] and the ‘inside’ audience, whose testimony this is and in whose interests it has been collected” (p. 90). I start, therefore, with the implications this dissertation raises for teachers before turning my attention to teacher educators and historians of education, suggesting specific points to ponder for each audience.

**Implications for Teachers**

For all of the benefits of teacher research, there is no denying how challenging it can be, especially in the Age of Accountability. Even Cindy, Gail, and Erik, who began their careers prior to *No Child Left Behind*, experienced their share of setbacks, such as struggling to come up with a good question, falling behind in being systematic, or even
being acutely aware of their atypical natures. Still, their stories offer teachers authentic accounts of inquiry as a way of knowing and being. Rust and Meyers (2007) associate some of the difficulty of action research with the fact that it “requires time alone and individual practice that is often unseen” (p. 80). The stories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik thus play a vital role in making the inquiry stance more visible to teachers, especially those who are just getting started with research. Whether encountering the mini-narratives featured in Chapter 7 or the extended versions in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, teachers and teacher researchers are likely to recognize “personal entry points” (Brindley & Crocco, 2009, p. 6) where they can identify with the narrators and reflect on their own professional journeys. Chapter 8, likewise, implicitly invites teachers to see themselves in relation to their surroundings, questioning whether or not their current contexts are conducive to inquiry and what it might take to marshal those elements.

Hymes (1977) long ago imagined “inquiry that is open to questions and answers not foreseen,” conceding, “pre-existing models and frameworks are inseparable from the requisite training, but one must be able to get beyond them” (p. 170). Cindy, Gail, and Erik have achieved that transcendence, and this dissertation illustrates to teachers how an inquiry stance can become an integral part of practice, regardless of context. Erik celebrates action research for taking us “beyond the limits of our classroom walls and our academic calendar year” (Shager, 2007, p. 49), just as Gail notes:

Teacher research gives me ownership of my own professional growth. I don’t need to wait and hope for a conference opportunity or a district-sponsored workshop that may not match my personal learning needs. […] It allows me to learn about and improve my teaching all day, every day, all year long. (Ritchie, 2014, para. 3)

Their extended teacher researcher journeys demonstrate to novice teacher researchers how it takes time—and critical friends—to acquire that level of confidence in their self-
directed learning. In other words, Chapters 7 and 8 contribute in equal and interconnected measure to our understanding of the endurance of long-term teacher researchers, such that the implications this study holds for teachers ultimately implicate teacher educators, too.

**Implications for Teacher Educators**

Flessner and Klehr (2016) adamantly insist, “It takes an inquiry stance to teach, facilitate, and nurture an inquiry stance” (p. 479). While Chapter 7 of this dissertation illustrates how an inquiry stance is, in part, innate, or at least derives from formative early experiences, teacher educators have a major role to play in guiding teacher candidates to acknowledge and actualize their inner capacity for inquiry. Blumenreich and Rogers (2016) caution against privileging teacher candidates’ “personal characteristics” above the need for teacher preparation (p. 7), and I agree teacher education programs should not attempt to filter applicant pools accordingly, especially in light of enrollment concerns (Will, 2018). However, teacher educators, by examining their own work in light of the analysis presented in Chapter 8, should consider whether teacher research—if it is already a part of their programs—is introduced as instrumental to “personal and professional development,” capable of being “a uniquely transforming experience” (Klehr, 2009, p. 38). Otherwise, it may feel like just another assignment, prompting Cindy to note, “I don’t get the sense that it sticks.”

Indeed, Rubin and Land (2017) advocate for autonomy, authenticity, and choice in teacher professional development, contending, “For teachers to be viewed as individuals with complicated histories and figurations of what teaching is, teacher education must also shift to models of lifelong learning” (p. 197). As long-term teacher researchers with an inquiry stance, Cindy, Gail, and Erik serve as excellent role models.
Their extensive narrative portraits in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate how autonomy, authenticity, and choice have facilitated their study of themselves, enhancing their understanding of teaching and learning in cycles of continual growth. Even when autonomy and choice wane or disappear, they find ways to take ownership of their professional learning, having been prepared by capable and committed teacher educators. Consequently, upon reading Chapter 8, teacher educators should aspire to be someone’s Jim Gee, Joan Isenberg, or Diana Hess. The vibrant developmental narratives of these long-term teacher researchers should remind teachers and teacher educators that ours is a long and storied profession, something historians of education know quite well.

**Implications for Historians**

Nearly four decades ago, Hymes (1980) accused educational research of focusing too narrowly “on the testing of relations among variables without much regard to sociocultural context,” claiming, “schools do not seem to be thought of as objects that it might take a long time, many hands, and even more than one generation to come to understand” (p. 4). While sociocultural studies of education have steadily increased in the intervening years, and while historians of education have long been exceptions to this rule, this dissertation offers historians a new avenue of research. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 attest to the extraordinary memories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik, perhaps owing to their persistence as teacher researchers. Engaging in practitioner inquiry requires heightened awareness of one’s surroundings, so aside from articulating powerful insights about teacher research, long-term teacher researchers could also be valuable sources for oral histories on a broad range of topics. They are ready, willing, and able to fulfill Fraser’s (2014) goal for “the voices of teachers” to be recognized as “an essential
part” of education history (p. x). As other scholars affirm (e.g. Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Napolitan & Bowman, 2018), there is tremendous historical value in teachers’ memories, which at the same time yield insights for contemporary dilemmas.

By focusing on the Age of Accountability, this study makes that dual impact abundantly clear. The era of high-stakes testing and top-down school reform is very much a present-day woe, yet it is decades in the making, as described in Chapter 1. The analysis of the master narratives of so-called failing schools presented in Chapter 2 also establishes how the problems plaguing today’s teachers have discernible historical roots. Chapters 1 and 2 thus call for a long view of the Age of Accountability, and Chapters 4, 5, and 6 illustrate those trends. Cindy, Gail, and Erik, as skilled narrators, guide us along their professional journeys, inviting us to witness the rise of neoliberalism in the background. In other words, they have lived the long view. High (2018) reminds oral historians to “shift from learning about to learning with” by fusing “experiential authority” with expertise (p. 40). Because long-term teacher researchers are lifelong learners, we have much to learn from and with them. As Erik aptly notes, “There are so many great, great stories out there, [...] stories that haven’t been told.”

Inclinations

Despite the myriad benefits of oral testimony, Gilmore (1996) reminds us of history’s fatal flaw: “Since historians enter a story at its end, they sometimes forget that what is past to them was future to their subjects. Too often, what they lose in the telling is what made their subjects’ lives worth living: hope” (p. 1). Though Cindy, Gail, and Erik vividly describe the glory days of teacher research, each expressing concern regarding the “climates of constraint” (Fleet et al., 2016, p. 9) so prevalent in the Age of Accountability, they continue to work in American public schools; they continue to hold
an inquiry stance towards their practice; and that stance continues to impact students, colleagues, and communities. This dissertation, which echoes their optimism, is but the beginning of my own scholarly agenda to spread and support teacher research. More accurately, studies derived from personal narratives often incorporate “multiple perspectives and agendas” (Maynes et al., 2008, emphasis mine). Thus, I turn to the myriad directions for my own professional journey, outlining the theoretical, practical, and historical contributions I hope to make.

Theoretical Directions

Though I have been consistently humbled by my interactions with Cindy, Gail, and Erik, the “dissemination paradox” weighs heavily on my mind. Explaining this dilemma, Klehr (2009) notes how “few, if any, classroom researchers are publicly engaged in, or have published, macro analyses of the field” (pp. 22-23). Gail’s dissertation makes her an exception to this rule, yet I am acutely cognizant of the role I am playing as a mouthpiece for my participants within the academy. Their individual histories—Chapters 4, 5, and 6—are largely their own words, yet I have connected the dots on their behalf. In some way, then, I am implicated in the “phalanx of academics and policy-makers who, whether by choice or by default, control and patrol the borders of educational research” (Klehr, 2009, p. 180). In Chapter 3, I presented a rationale for recruiting participants via personal recommendation (Yow, 2005), but I have stopped short of critiquing the status quo that teacher researchers require capital-s Scholar gatekeepers. Moreover, in producing this dissertation, I am now one of them, exerting some level of ownership over the stories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik. As I continue to position myself as a teacher research scholar, I will undoubtedly continue to wrestle with the theoretical impact of the dissemination paradox.
Connected to this dilemma is the question of whether or not teacher research truly is a movement. It is not a question I am prepared to answer in the scope of this dissertation, but it definitely merits future consideration. In the course of my conversations with Cindy, Gail, and Erik, I was most struck by the spirit of the ’60s that in some way united them, though they are scattered around the country and staggered across the decades. From Cindy’s anti-war activism, which positioned her as “a teacher out of the ’60s;” to Gail’s description of herself as “an old liberal softy;” to Erik’s eternal interest in civil rights history, which echoes in his willingness to march in opposition to the Walker administration’s Tea Party budget cuts; their collective portraits suggest an association between teacher research and liberal activism. Klehr (2009) explains,

Teacher research is based on the apparently radical assumption that teachers are capable of marshaling the methods of research to investigate and articulate what they know about pedagogy and practice; to understand, question and change what goes on in classrooms and schools; and to contribute to broader educational knowledge. (p. 4)

Given the stories of Cindy, Gail, and Erik, the “apparently radical” nature of inquiry needs more theoretical exploration. Teachers who are change agents, after all, are not in the business of conserving the status quo, yet what are the broader and inherently political implications of framing teacher research as a liberal project? My future research will tackle that and related questions.

Practical Directions

Given the nature of doctoral dissertations, pre-service teachers are unlikely to read this study from start to finish. Even Chapters 7 and 8, though stand-alone articles, may need some context and scaffolding to be of use. Indeed, they are written primarily for an audience of teacher educators. However, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are fairly accessible narratives, and stories are useful in teacher education for cultivating “more
innovative, grounded, and continually evolving teachers” (Pinnegar, Pinnegar, & Lay, 2018, p. 55), which ably describes educators with an inquiry stance. According to Pinnegar et al. (2018), “stories allow teacher educators to build on teacher knowledge as well as disrupt preconceptions and beliefs” (p. 58), but Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will not accomplish this in and of themselves. Thus, one practical direction I will take as a result of this study is to continue working with those narratives: storying, re-storying (McDonald et al., 2016), and framing them for use with pre-service teachers. Specific questions in the margins or prompts for discussion at the end of each portrait could invite teacher candidates to consider their own storied lives and the new professional chapters they are beginning.

Relatedly, Rosen (2018) recommends the use of video in narrative-based professional development, which facilitates virtual visits to other teachers’ classrooms in conjunction with sharing stories of practice. Likewise, van der Heijden et al. (2015) suggest, “to further investigate teachers as change agents, it is worthwhile to observe and videotape them in their schools along with interviewing them” (p. 696). While doing so was outside of the scope (and budget) for this dissertation, it is certainly a path worth exploring in the future. When prompted, Erik, the youngest participant, went straight to a visual medium to imagine his professional life story. Framing it as “an independent film” may give newcomers to teacher research a vivid sense of the abstract philosophy of inquiry as stance. In addition to introducing pre-service and in-service teachers to teacher research, finding the time and the resources to film episodes of the inquiry stance in action—or even in-depth interviews—could also enhance the counter-
narrative potential of teacher research. Moreover, such video clips could contribute to
the historical value of this work.

**Historical Directions**

A video library of teacher researchers talking about and demonstrating their
inquiry stance would have tremendous potential from a practical standpoint, while at the
same time recording vibrant data for historians of education, both now and in the future.
The Teachers in the Movement project out of the University of Virginia is a profoundly
instructive parallel (Teachers in the Movement, 2016). In a more traditional medium,
examples of teacher research from across the decades could be compiled into a
historical anthology, synthesized with evolving scholarship about inquiry, as described
in Chapter 2. Such a project would honor teachers' insights over time and interlace
time and practice in alignment with the core philosophy of teacher research,
theory and practice in alignment with the core philosophy of teacher research,
essentially exploring what impact, if any, the changing sociohistorical contexts of
education have on the questions teacher researchers ask and the means by which they
pursue those wonderings. Furthermore, while this dissertation, by design, featured a
small number of participants, an anthology of this nature would cast a wider net.

To be sure, Cindy, Gail, and Erik are exceptional, but there are likely other long-
term teacher researchers out there. In particular, more oral history interviews with
members of the now-defunct Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) are
warranted to document the successes, challenges, and ultimate dissipation of the
network. The same can be said for the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar (BTRS).
All 3 narrators, even in the absence of those structural supports, continue to devote
their inquiry stance to improving teaching and learning for all students. Consequently,
there is good reason to believe the stories of their fellow TNLI and BTRS members are
also of practical, theoretical, and historical value. Thus, given my enduring interest in
the lives and lessons of America’s public school teachers, this oral history project is
likely the first of many I will undertake.

**Conclusion**

Napolitan and Bowman (2018) argue, “There is power in telling the stories of
teachers who have come before us. They can help shape our and our teacher
candidates’ understandings of the possibilities of our work” (para. 12). While this
dissertation serves as a capstone on my experience as a doctoral student in Curriculum
and Instruction, collaborating with Cindy, Gail, and Erik has expanded the possibilities of
my own work in unimaginable ways. Like any capstone, this dissertation demands
concrete finality, but this conclusion is symbolic at best, especially in light of the
qualitative methodology guiding this study. Indeed, Clandinin (2018) reminds us,
“Stories are always on their way, in the midst, in the making, because experience is
always on the way” (p. 19). Like Brindley and Crocco (2009), I have aimed all along to
“promot[e] the voice of the teacher,” which, they argue, “sets the record straight and
shows that teachers can and do adapt their practice, seek new strategies, and
collaborate to find solutions to the myriad of dilemmas they face each year” (p. 3).
However, the counter-narrative activity of setting the record straight is an ongoing
process, evolving in response to the shifting sociopolitical climate.

I never set out to uncover an objective truth, but I have achieved my twin aims of
exploring and documenting the enduring inquiry stance of long-term teacher
researchers, situating their unique stories against the backdrop of the Age of
Accountability affecting American public schools. To be sure, gathering, storying,
restorying, and analyzing my participants’ memories and musings has been a herculean
task, but it has also been a tremendous honor. My noble narrators have awakened me
to the complex, intellectual work of early childhood, elementary, middle school, and
alternative education—contexts in which I have no firsthand teaching experience.

Acknowledging how “individuals are shaped by their contexts but never reducible to
them” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 67), I see Cindy, Gail, and Erik as transcending
disciplinary and contextual boundaries. Each of them has such a powerful and thriving
inquiry stance that inspires me to reflect on my own work and pursue my own
wonderings. Bearing Gilmore’s (1996) advice in mind—to keep the hope within the
history, I am deeply optimistic the inordinate number of hours I have put into this project
will in some way hasten or amplify the “radical, but quiet” revolution of teacher research
(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 318), provided others join me in listening to and
learning from the long-term teacher researchers in America’s public schools.
APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear [INSERT NAME],

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida, I invite you to nominate participants for my dissertation study exploring the experiences of long-term teacher researchers. I am contacting you specifically because [INSERT REASON].

I intend to recruit up to 3 viable participants, each of whom must:

a) have practiced teacher research since approximately 2000

b) have engaged in multiple cycles of inquiry

c) believe themselves to hold an inquiry stance toward their teaching

d) have retired from or currently work in a public K-12 school

Ideal participants are reflective practitioners who are interested in being part of an oral history of teacher research. Existing scholarship suggests practitioner researchers are likely to enjoy talking about their experiences with teacher inquiry.

Participation will consist of three phone or videoconference interviews lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each. The first interview will focus on participants’ professional life histories—i.e. the journey to teaching and to teacher research. The second interview will explore participants’ experiences with practitioner inquiry, seeking examples of the inquiry stance at work. During the third interview, participants will reflect on the experience of having and maintaining an inquiry stance.

By preserving the experiences and insights of seasoned practitioner researchers in American public schools, my dissertation study can provide important insights to the next generation of teacher inquirers. Such an outcome depends largely upon having qualified and committed interviewees, so I greatly appreciate your consideration of my request to nominate participants.

If you have anyone in mind, or if you have any questions about the study, please contact me via e-mail (ecurrin@ufl.edu) or phone [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Currin
APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT SCREENING FORM

Participant Name: ______________ E-mail: _____________________
Nominated by: ______________ E-mail: _____________________

Initial E-mail

Dear [INSERT NAME],

You have been nominated by ______________ to participate in a study exploring your experiences as a long-term teacher researcher. In theory, educators who have engaged in practitioner research for a long period of time should embody what is known as an inquiry stance, a firm but flexible commitment to systematically collecting data related to problems of practice for the sake of continually improving teaching and learning. I am looking for 2-3 people who a) have practiced teacher research since approximately 2000, b) have engaged in multiple cycles of inquiry, c) believe themselves to hold an inquiry stance toward their teaching, and d) have retired from or currently work in a public K-12 school. You were nominated because you are believed to fit these criteria.

Participants will be asked to do the following:

• sign the provided consent form, to be scanned and returned over e-mail or sent in a stamped envelope that I will provide upon request

• participate in 3 recorded phone or videoconference interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes each (scheduled over the course of a month and at your convenience)

• review transcripts and other documents (optional)

Given the topic and the level of commitment involved, if you are interested in participating in this study, please send me your phone number and let me know when you are available for a brief initial phone call to get acquainted and discuss the project. You should also feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns, as well as to forward this information to potentially interested colleagues.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Elizabeth Currin
Screening Call

After exchanging introductions, I asked potential participants the following questions and took notes while they responded.

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. Where do you teach/have you taught?
3. Tell me about your school(s).
4. Tell me about a memorable inquiry cycle.
5. Given the story you have shared, what stands out about what contributed to your success as a teacher researcher?

Next, I assessed the nominee’s willingness to participate and reiterated the anticipated commitments. I then reviewed the need to submit a signed consent form, either by mail or e-mail (and determined whether or not I needed to send the participant a stamped envelope). Finally, I scheduled a time for the first interview or indicated that we could do so over e-mail.

After the screening call, I used my notes to rate potential participants according to the following chart.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promptness of Communication</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Not Very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to Participate</td>
<td>Very</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Not Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of Inquiry</td>
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<td>Sufficient</td>
<td>Lacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail of Story</td>
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<td>Sufficient</td>
<td>Lacking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall Rapport</td>
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<td>Sufficient</td>
<td>Lacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Participant's Context:</td>
<td>Additional Notes:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview 1: Focused Life History

Guiding Questions: How did you come to be a teacher? How did you come to be a teacher researcher?

At the start of the conversation, remind the participant of the informed consent guidelines and the goals for the study.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What was your K-12 experience like, as a student?
3. Share a significant story from that time in your life.
4. Tell me about a memorable teacher.
5. When did you know you wanted to be a teacher? Tell me about your journey towards that profession.
6. When did you first learn about teacher research? Tell me about your experience of becoming a teacher researcher.
7. Share a story of one of your early experiences with teacher research.
8. How would you define inquiry as stance? How did you learn about this concept?
9. At what point did you feel you had developed an inquiry stance?
10. Tell me about the process of getting to that point.
11. Is there anything else you would like to share, based on what we talked about today?

At the close of the conversation, remind the participant the next interview will delve into the experience of having an inquiry stance, soliciting more examples of the teacher’s past inquiry cycles leading up to the present. Arrange the time and date of the next interview.
Interview 2: Reconstructing Current Details

Guiding Questions: What is it like to have an inquiry stance? How does one inquiry cycle lead to another?

At the start of the conversation, again remind the participant of the informed consent guidelines and the goals for the study. Briefly review the first conversation in order to transition to the second interview.

1. During our last conversation, we talked about your journey towards developing an inquiry stance. Today, I’d like you to tell me more about what having an inquiry stance looks like. Start by explaining how you go about identifying problems of practice. Tell me about the processes you use.

2. Tell me a story about a particularly vexing problem of practice. How did your inquiry stance inform your approach?

3. Walk me through another one of your inquiry cycles. How does one cycle lead to the next?

4. If I were to visit your school during one of your inquiry cycles, what would I see?

5. To what extent is your inquiry stance recognizable to others? Tell me about a time when this happened.

6. Describe how your classroom and/or your teaching have changed as a result of your teacher research.

7. How do your inquiry cycles from this point of your career differ from your early experiences with inquiry?

8. Was there ever a time you felt like you were losing your inquiry stance? If so, can you describe that for me?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share, based on what we talked about?

At the close of the conversation, remind the participant the next interview will delve into the participant’s understanding of the inquiry stance and how to maintain it, soliciting interpretation of and commentary on the first two interviews. Arrange the time and date of the final interview.
Interview 3: Reflecting on Meaning

Guiding Questions: What helps and/or hinders your inquiry stance? How do you make sense of your ability to be a long-term teacher researcher?

At the start of the conversation, again remind the participant of the informed consent guidelines and the goals for the study. Briefly review the first two conversations in order to transition to the third and final interview.

1. Prior to this conversation, you have shared with me your journey to the classroom and to teacher research, as well as illustrating your inquiry stance at work. In your mind, which of your experiences most clearly illustrates your inquiry stance? Why?

2. How does your inquiry stance distinguish you from other educators?

3. What do you think has enabled you to keep going as a teacher researcher?

4. When you reflect on the stories you have shared with me, how do you think your school(s) has/have supported or inhibited your inquiry stance?

5. How have public schools changed during your professional lifetime? To what do you attribute those changes?

6. You have shared a number of stories with me. Take a step back and tell me a little about those stories. What kind of character are you? Who are the heroes and villains? Where is the conflict? Are your stories comedies or tragedies? Why?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share, based on what we talked about today or any of our prior conversations?

At the close of the conversation, thank the narrator for participating in the study and provide some idea of what to expect (i.e. the opportunity to review the transcripts and core narrative and the estimated timeline for completion of the dissertation).
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Currin is a scholar in the field of teacher education. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English at Wake Forest University in 2005 and a Master of Arts in English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 2007. Prior to becoming a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction, Elizabeth was a high school English teacher in Clemmons, North Carolina and Gainesville, Florida. Her research interests include practitioner inquiry, the history of education, and representations of teachers in pop culture and the media.