

NourishED

Growing Together Through Inquiry

December 14, 2025

Reflections on the Human Side of Inquiry

Hello inspiring educators,

As we wrap up a hectic time in the flow of a school year and prepare for some family time over the winter holidays, I am pausing to reflect on how I think about inquiry as a means for improving practice. When I was a teacher in the K-12 context, I rarely concerned myself with the extent to which my everyday decision making was 'systematic' or 'evidence-based.' I concerned myself with trying to deeply understand my students, hungry for what Dan Lortie in his seminal sociological study of teachers referred to as 'psychic rewards' – those moments when you see you have 'reached' your students. You hear a gasp of excitement, a long exhale of "ohhhhhh, I get it!" or – my personal favorite – a really insightful question of the kind that kids only ask when they are really thinking about what they are learning. I dabbled, experimented, and pivoted my way towards eliciting as many of those moments as I could.

At some point, I had the privilege of working with a principal who pushed us to think beyond those psychic rewards. Was it enough to hear the gasps and see the excitement, he asked, if it was not translating into students who know how to read, write, and engage in mathematics? Didn't we have a responsibility to make sure that all students – and especially those farthest from opportunity – were mastering necessary academic content? I found this a powerful motivator and realized that what was needed was a way to hitch my experimentation to a focus on results. I learned how to engage with my colleagues in a more structured approach to our experimentation and to examine the results of our experiments in terms of student learning outcomes.

As a doctoral student in educational research, I encountered a different message: gut feelings weren't enough. We needed rigorous evidence. And while I came to value this empirical lens, I was troubled by how 'research' often dismissed the knowledge teachers carry in their minds and bodies—the knowledge that actually drives improvement in classrooms.

It turned out I wasn't the only person thinking about these issues, and increasingly in education, there have been alternative notions of research emerging – including design, improvement science, and research-practice partnerships – in which the practical knowledge of professionals is understood to be quite precious. (To learn more about the different traditions of improvement research in education, check out the video series here: <https://improvementscholars.org/videos/>)

When working with teachers on their problems of practice, I have often noticed that they think – because they have been told to think so – that they 'should' get focused on data. Expected to "do PLCs," they think the best way to go about improving their practice is to set aside all those pesky subjective experiences they have in their everyday work, and get serious by looking firmly and strictly at 'data.' They should not have a human conversation, they should follow a 'protocol' to ensure they stay focused and on task.

When those kinds of protocols and data-driven conversations are running like clockwork, they can be impactful. And yet, sometimes those conversations can take the attention too far away from thinking about, talking with, and knowing the people who are in our buildings –the ones we are here to serve. I have learned that powerful inquiry into practice is not one that necessarily starts with 'data.' Often, inquiry is more impactful when we begin by talking about our students and our students' work. When we do this, we bring out our precious practical knowledge into the conversation – and we can get excited! Inquiry should not be a chore to be done. It should be – as the name of this community indicates – nourishing. When we tap into what teachers often naturally find interesting – seeing something light up in our students' assignments, in our colleagues' ideas, in the potential we see of a new piece of curriculum or new technology tool to finally help get an idea across to our students – we nourish our agency and joy in the work. And this unleashes the energy we need to use data and the discipline of inquiry to create results.

As we prepare for our upcoming adventure into improving upon our challenges of practice together, I hope we will do this in a way that puts the humans involved right at the center. Yes, there is power in the discipline of structured inquiry and the clarity of 'data' – but to realize this power, the inquiry must be hitched to our core human desires to realize our goals and connect, reach, and develop our students.

I'm excited to learn alongside you this coming year. More to come soon on how we'll use our time and structure our inquiries together!

Liz Zumpe



What's Up Next

Our Next Info Session for Q&A

January 15, 2026 at 7:00 PM Central Time

[Join Zoom Meeting](#)

Meeting ID: 854 7271 8762

Passcode: fQ2XD

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