

The Reflective Principal



INQUIRY AS A TOOL
FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

P R I N C I P A L ' S
P R O J E C T

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The efforts, insight, and creativity of the following individuals shaped this document, and the other products produced through this project.

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Toward Understanding

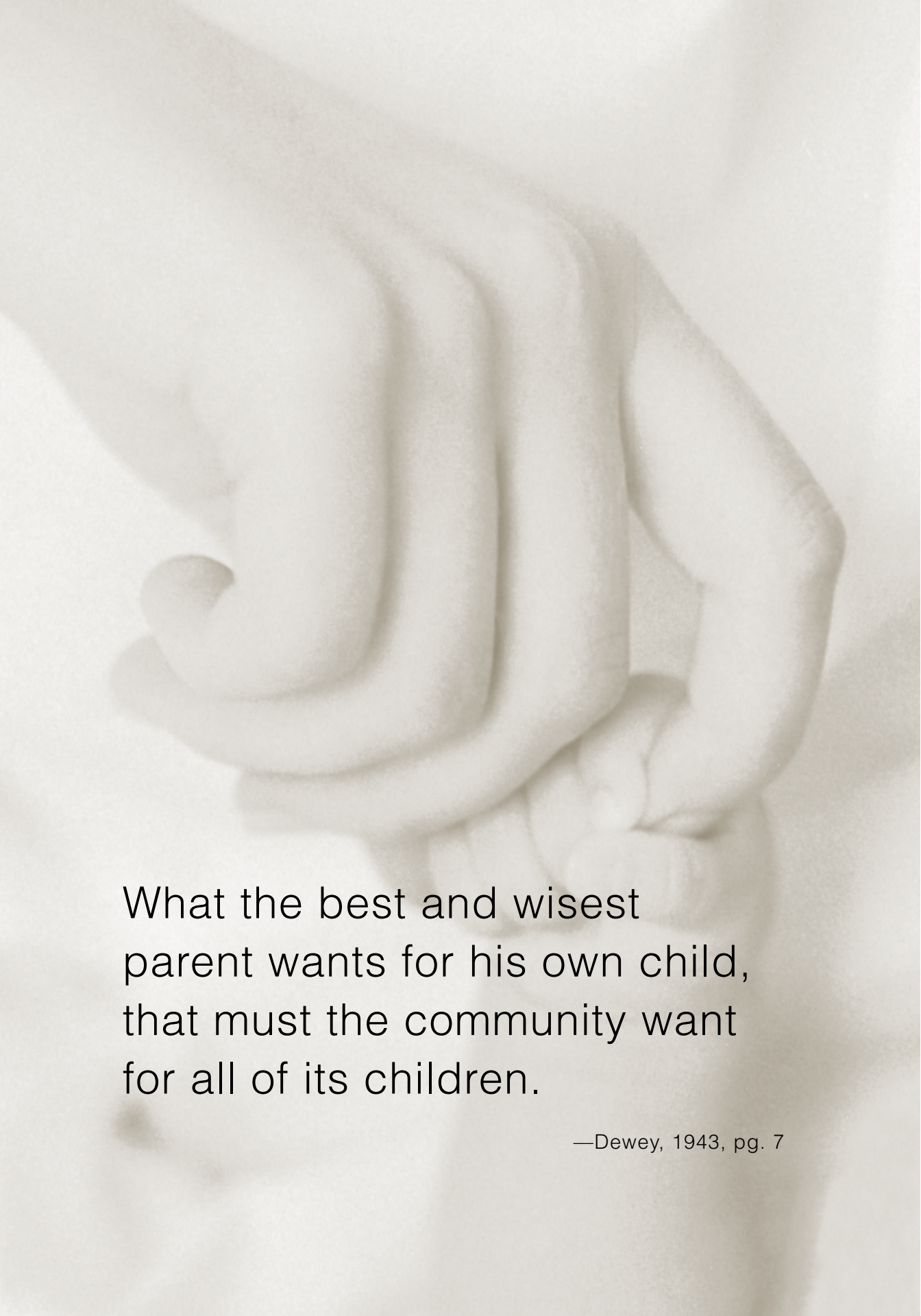
The information that follows has been informed by a group of principals actively working to create inclusive learning communities, responsive to the learning styles and needs of a full array of students, including those with disabilities. These schools and principals were selected for this project because they were actively engaged in school-wide reform and their classrooms included students with a range of abilities, including those with significant needs.

The insights and strategies described in this booklet were derived from our direct involvement with principals in four states over a three year period. Our partnership with these principals involved gathering information to assist us in understanding the context, culture, and process of change in these buildings; informing the decision-making of our principal partners through the sharing of data and perspectives about their schools; and helping us evaluate the usefulness of action research as a strategy for whole school change. Survey, interview, and observational data were gathered in these schools and used to inform the work of the principals and the development of our products. The reflections shared by these principals may help others understand the nature and value of the reflective process, and its potential benefit for students and school improvement.



At the Department of Education we recognize the complex demands confronting principals in today's schools. The principals involved in this federally funded project have found that disciplined inquiry and reflection are practical and effective school renewal strategies that benefit principals, teachers, and students.

— **Anne Smith,**
Department of Education



What the best and wisest
parent wants for his own child,
that must the community want
for all of its children.

—Dewey, 1943, pg. 7

Reflective Practice and School Leadership

This booklet is focused on the use of reflective practice as a school improvement strategy for principals. It is designed for school leaders who have not had experience using this tool in their daily work. Writing almost a century ago about the role of the reflective process in education¹, John Dewey's ideas about this form of thinking have found a growing audience among reform-minded educators involved in the day to day realities of school improvement initiatives.

At a time when standards based reform and its associated accountability strategies are viewed as silver bullets that will save public education, more holistic and reflective approaches to thinking about and responding to educational challenges are contributing a perspective to this dialogue that delves deeper into the complexities of the change process. Eric Schaps expresses the sentiments of those frustrated that simplistic, overly-prescriptive approaches to school reform are fueling unrealistic expectations, arguing that these approaches fail to take into account that "*worthwhile change* [emphasis added] is inescapably local, slow, and difficult" (1997, pg. 20).

During the last 10 years or so, an increase in practitioner-driven inquiry (e.g., participatory action research, teacher research, collaborative action research) and the value attributed to practitioner-derived knowledge, has contributed to the blurring of boundaries between research, practice, and



A challenge for me is to be able to use the information we have and figure out how to make it work for all kids, not just those kids that are in the forefront, but for all of them.

—**Debbie Eklund**,
Luff Elementary



I want the teachers to see that they often have the solutions, it's not just me. It's a lot easier if there is a lot of feedback that's going back and forth about possible solutions.

—**Patty Cox**
Proctor Elementary
School

¹See Dewey, 1910, 1933, 1938.

policy (Hargreaves, 1996). These contextually grounded approaches to discovering workable solutions to school improvement have the potential to bridge what has been described as a “relevance gap” between traditional research and practice (Kohl, 1983). Emily Calhoun (1994) writes:

. . . the unknown potential of school renewal may well come to us through the collective study and search for improvement that occurs as we mount our own research and development efforts within each school (pg. 3).



As building leaders, principals can communicate the importance of reflection and inquiry as a tool to improve practice by actively using these strategies in their own professional lives.

I believe in learning communities and all of us are learning and all have to be willing to grow and change with kids.

—Sarah Milligan,
Principal
Fairview Elementary
School

The Leader's Teachers²

They practiced meditation. Meditation made them good at seeing how things happen. Meditation grounded them in the infinite. . . .

Their leadership did not rest on technique or on theatrics, but on silence and on their ability to pay attention.

They moved with grace and awareness, and they were able to negotiate complex situations safely.

They were considerate. They did no injury. They were courteous and quiet, like guests. They knew how to yield gracefully and how to be natural and inconspicuous.

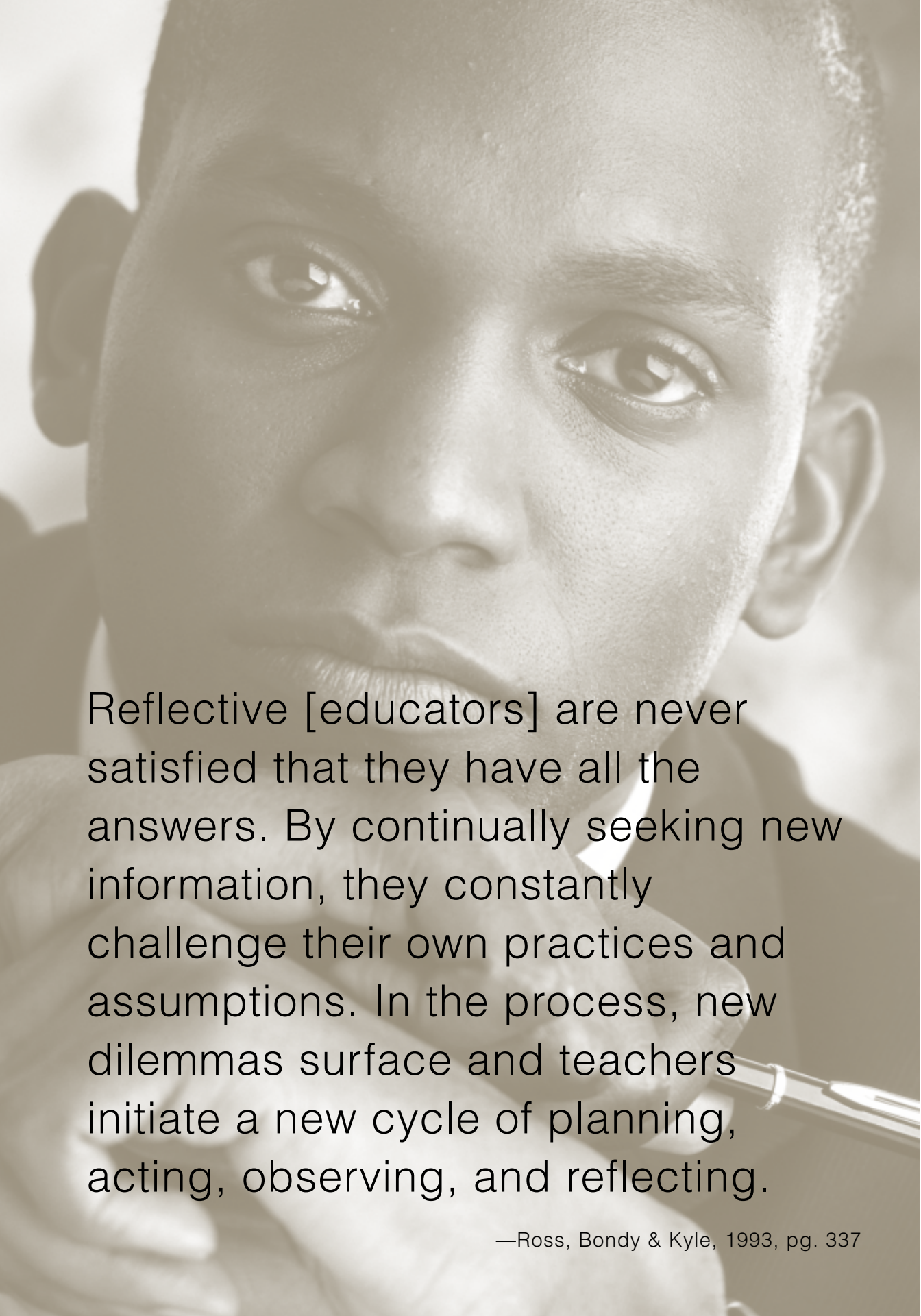
They were as open and receptive and available as the valleys that lie among the hills.

They could clarify events for others, because they had done it for themselves. They could speak to the depths of another person, because they had known their own deeper conflicts and blocks.

Because they had given up selfishness, they could enhance others.

They were not trying to become enlightened, because they were enlightened.

²Heider, 1985, pg. 29.



Reflective [educators] are never satisfied that they have all the answers. By continually seeking new information, they constantly challenge their own practices and assumptions. In the process, new dilemmas surface and teachers initiate a new cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

—Ross, Bondy & Kyle, 1993, pg. 337

Nurturing Reflective Skills

Reflection as an educational improvement strategy has come to encompass a wide range of applications and meanings, grounded in a basic belief that critical examination of one's daily work is essential to guide future action. At its most basic level, reflection is defined as a way of thinking about educational matters that involves the ability to make rational choices and to assume responsibility for those choices.

Ross (1989) describes the reflective process as including the following elements:

- Recognition of an educational dilemma;
- Response to a dilemma by recognizing both the similarities to other situations and the unique qualities of the particular situation;
- Framing and reframing the dilemma;
- Experimentation with the dilemma to discover the consequences and implications of various solutions; and
- Examination of intended and unintended consequences of an implemented solution and evaluation of the solution by determining whether the consequences are desirable or not.



Actually taking time to gather information and putting aside a time to share, makes us pause and reflect, and be ready to explain what we are doing.

— **Lana Farnsworth,**
Principal
William Southern
Elementary School

Three personality attributes have been associated with reflective practitioners:



The temptation as a principal is to hurry and make decisions and hurry and change things. Action research really slows you down because you have to take time to collect data . . . it is part of the process to make good decisions. . . .

—**Alison Boggs,**
Principal
Adams City
Middle School

- **Open-mindedness**, referring to an interest in listening to all sides of an issue, and a willingness to question the most basic assumptions that underlie a belief or practice.
- **Responsibility**, implying a desire to actively seek out the truth and use this information to respond to problem situations.
- **Wholeheartedness**, encompassing a belief system that one can critically evaluate themselves, their work, and existing structures, and overcome fear and uncertainty to make meaningful change.

As principals begin to think about their use of reflection as a school improvement tool, it may be helpful to consider several frameworks that describe the use of reflection in the school setting. Killion and Todnem (1991) talk about reflection in terms of *when* it occurs relative to a situation in the educational setting.



Reflection makes decision-making more sound. You can take into account all contingencies of a situation to make decisions that will have the best impact on the lives of children.

—**Sarah Milligan,**
Principal
Fairview Elementary
School

- **Reflection-in-practice** encompasses the quick analysis and decision-making that occurs when you are in the midst of practice.
- **Reflection-on-practice** encompasses the evaluative thinking that occurs after an event has transpired.
- **Reflection-for-practice** is the ongoing analysis and decision-making designed to inform future practice.

It is this third form of reflection that is the desired outcome of the first two opportunities for reflection, representing a *proactive* rather than reactive approach to educational decision-making.

Van Manen (1977) describes reflection as occurring at three distinct levels. These levels parallel the growth of an educator in applying the tools and skills of one's profession. The first level of reflection focuses on the appropriate selection and application of an educational strategy or technique in a given situation. The next level of reflection involves reflection about the assumptions of specific practices as well as the outcomes. The last level, sometimes called *critical reflection* involves deeper questioning about educational issues based on moral and ethical dimensions of practice.

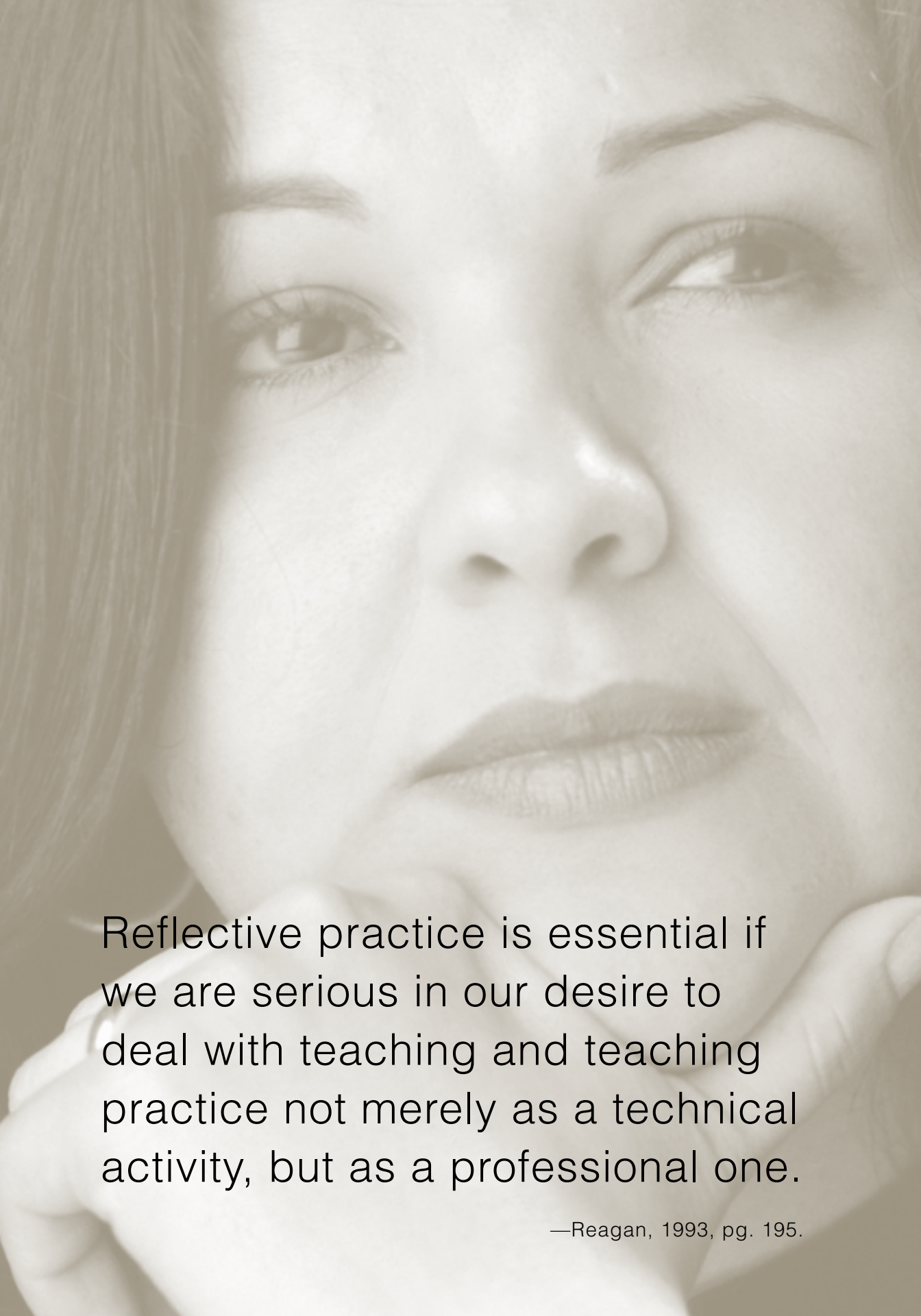
It is evident that the use of reflection as a tool to improve practice involves more than merely taking a moment to think about an event. It is also clear that one's facility in using reflection as a school improvement strategy develops with time and experience. Becoming a reflective practitioner has much in common with the process of becoming "real" as the Skin Horse explained to the Rabbit in the story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1981).

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand" (pp. 14–16).



Why isn't this working? What's wrong with these people? . . . Well, really nothing was wrong with the people. There were some things we didn't think about.

—**Bill Leithiser, Principal**
Brewer Middle School



Reflective practice is essential if we are serious in our desire to deal with teaching and teaching practice not merely as a technical activity, but as a professional one.

—Reagan, 1993, pg. 195.

Incorporating Reflection Into Your Professional Life

Principals who used reflection as part of their action research process were interviewed to find out how they integrated this approach into their daily lives as building leaders. The strategies below emerged as common themes among the principals.

- **Encourage teacher use of reflection.**

In several of our participating schools, principals actively engaged in efforts to encourage teachers to become more reflective about their professional practice. Principals involved teachers as participants in their inquiry projects, and used data sharing meetings as opportunities to introduce the inquiry process to their staff. Some principals developed teacher work groups and used building level teams to explore issues that directly affected teaching and learning.

- **Find and utilize an existing structure to support your use of reflection.**

Principals described both formal and informal mechanisms that served this purpose for them. For some, existing administrative teams provided an opportunity to talk with others in order to refine problems, generate ideas, and gather data. For others, a regularly scheduled time to meet with a colleague for coffee and conversation served as an important source of support. In general, they recommended finding time within existing routines and consider this an appointment that must be kept.



Every day I make decisions about what is best for kids.

—**Debbie Eklund,**
Luff Elementary



I find myself, as I meet with committees, asking guiding questions. What data do we need? I am doing a much better job at making data-based decisions.

—**Debby Fink, Principal**
Hartwood Elementary
School

- **Incorporate reflective practice into professional goals.**

Whether formal or informal, most educators have a professional development plan that outlines the activities that will be undertaken to promote professional growth. Rather than viewing reflective practice as something “extra” to do, principals integrated this activity within their own professional development goals, ensuring both that it would occur, and that it would become part of their professional evaluation.



My involvement with people from the university, asking a lot of questions, was something that initially pushed me to be a more reflective practitioner.

**—Alison Boggs,
Principal
Adams City
Middle School**

- **Use a critical friend to support your efforts.**

Many people involved in reflective practice and action research have found a “critical friend” to be an essential support to their efforts. A critical friend is someone who can provide on-going feedback and perspective to the principal by asking key questions and providing resources and supports that inform the process of inquiry. The critical friends to the principals in this project were individuals drawn from both within and outside of the school district, illustrating the range of possibilities that exist in seeking out such a resource.

Time for Reflection

Endless drama in a group clouds consciousness. Too much noise overwhelms the senses. Continual input obscures genuine insight. Do not substitute sensationalism for learning.

Allow regular time for silent reflection. Turn inward and digest what has happened. Let the senses rest and grow still.

Teach people to let go of their superficial mental chatter and obsessions. Teach people to pay attention to the whole body's reaction to a situation.

When group members have time to reflect, they can see more clearly what is essential in themselves and others.

Heider, 1985, pg. 23)

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Additional Resources

Books About Reflective Practice and Practitioner Inquiry:

- Brubacher, J. W., Case, C. W., & Reagan, T. G. (1994). *Becoming a reflective educator. How to build a culture of inquiry in the schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
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- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner. How professionals think in action*. Basic Books, Inc.

Examples of Teacher Reflection:

- Hall, I., Campbell, C. H., & Mieh, E. J. (1997). *Class acts. Teachers reflect on their own classroom practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review Reprint Series.
- Kuzmeskus, J. (1996). *We teach them all. Teachers write about diversity*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Paley, V. (1992). *You can't say you can't play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Resources to Support Reflective Practice:

Massachusetts Field Center for Teaching and Learning

University of Massachusetts, Boston
100 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125
(617) 287-7660
e-mail: ma_field_ctr@umb.edu
This organization publishes a newsletter that features a teacher research column and hosts annual conferences on teacher writing and teacher research.

Pathways

University of North Dakota
P.O. Box 7189
Grand Forks, ND 58202-7189
The Pathways newsletter encourages teachers and administrators to write from their own experience, to ask questions about pedagogy and curriculum, to describe their own classrooms, and to explore how historical continuities illuminate current practices.

Teacher Research Journal

Johnson Press
49 Sheridan Ave.
Albany, NY 12210
This journal balances research reports with explanations of classroom inquiry. Articles include teachers' reports of research findings from their own classrooms, as well as their personal accounts of the process of conducting classroom

research, which address issues of time and technique.

Teacher as Researcher Group, American Education Research Association

This World Wide Web site showcases research on practice by K-12 teachers and the work of teachers involved in adult literacy settings, community colleges, and universities.

XTAR - A Network for Teacher Researchers

XTAR is a telecommunications discussion group intended to enable teacher researchers to share their inquiries - their questions, findings, insights, problems, and suggestions - with colleagues in schools and universities all over the world. Anyone involved in classroom inquiry is welcome to participate.

To subscribe to XTAR:

- Send a message to listserv@lester.appstate.edu
- Skip the subject.
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