Reflective Practice and Continuous Learning

The ultimate guardians of excellence are not external
forces, but internal professional responsibilities.

—Paul Ramsden (1992, p. 221)
Learning to Teach in Higher Education

Learning is the foundation of individual and organizational improvement (Argyris, 1977; Argyris & Schon, 1974). Learning requires reflection. From an individual perspective, "It can be argued that reflective practice . . . is the process which underlies all forms of high professional competence" (Bright, 1996, p. 166). From an organizational perspective, reflective practice is considered a powerful norm in schools in order to achieve high levels of student learning (Hawley & Valli, 2000; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). It is becoming increasingly clear that when educators engage in high-quality learning experiences, the impact on student learning is positive. Reflective practices facilitate learning, renewal, and growth throughout the development of career educators (Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000). Sparks-Langer and Colton (1991) explain the recent emphasis on reflective practice in schools:

> The shift toward an interest in reflective thinking has come about partly as a reaction to the overly technical and simplistic view of teaching that dominated the 1980s. Gradually, however, experts in supervision, staff development, and teacher education have begun to recognize that teaching is a complex, situation-specific dilemma ridden endeavor. . . . Today, profes-

> sional knowledge is seen as coming both from sources outside the teacher and from the teachers' own interpretations of everyday experience. (p. 37)

Most educators experience a continuously hectic pace in their daily professional lives. Such a pace is not conducive to reflection and learning. The dominant culture in many schools is one of doing, with little or no time for reflection and learning. The context of teaching has been referred to as *hot action,* meaning that "educators must develop habits and routines in order to cope; and [that] self-awareness is difficult as there is little opportunity to notice or think about what one is doing" (Eraut, 1985, p. 128). It is not unusual for teachers to put aside carefully constructed lessons due to unanticipated circumstances or responses. It is also not unusual for those same lessons to become fragmented as a result of the constant coming to and going from classrooms by students and staff. Educators routinely must juggle multiple tasks, process information on many levels, and make on-the-spot decisions to meet the changing needs and demands in the teaching environment. On some days, the intensity of teachers' work might be aptly compared with that of air traffic controllers. Glickman (1988) describes an inherent dilemma for the teaching profession as having "knowledge but not certainty" (p. 63). Within each specific teaching context lie multiple and unpredictable circumstances that require spontaneous and unique responses. The demand for accountability and the steady flow of curricular and instructional initiatives add to the challenging context of teaching. The critical balance between pressure and support for improvement (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991) is almost always on tilt toward the side of pressure. Shifting from a culture of doing to a culture of learning while doing is not easily accomplished.

Given these challenging context variables, why is it reasonable to assume that significant improvements in educational practice are possible? What changes in the culture of schools are necessary to support continuous learning and development of educators? Where does an individual educator start? One of the purposes of this book is to support practicing educators in the development of capacities within themselves and within their schools to continuously learn and improve by embedding the norm of reflective practice in their work. A major premise is captured by the Chinese proverb, "Sometimes you must go slow to go fast." Reflective practice cannot be done in the fast lane. Although much of educational practice occurs in the fast lane, educators must find or create a rest area along the roadside to reflect on past practices and to determine appropriate adjustments for future practice.

In this chapter, multiple perspectives on the meaning of reflective practice are shared. A rationale for the potential of reflective practice to improve schools is articulated. The characteristics of reflective educators are described. Presented last is the reflective practice spiral, which serves as the organizing framework for the book. This framework suggests that the seeds of reflective practice begin first within individuals and then spread into the broader educational community.

What Is Reflective Practice and Where Did It Come From?

> *Reflective practice is as much a state of mind as it is a set of activities.*
>
> (Vaughan, 1990, p. ix)

A review of the origins of reflective practice and its evolution to the present day indicates a substantial history and base of knowledge. The thinking about reflection and reflective practice has evolved over a period of many decades if not centuries, through carefully constructed theory, research, and application. Numerous theorists, researchers, and teacher educators have contributed to this body of knowledge. John Dewey is frequently recognized as the foundational 20th-century influence on reflection in education (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). His work, however, drew from much earlier Eastern and Western philosophers and educators including Buddha, Plato, and Lao Tzu. In more recent years, the work of Donald Schon (1983, 1987) has inspired a resurgence of interest in reflective practice in the field of education.

Some of the significant contributions to the thinking about reflective practice are highlighted in Table 1.1. Each of the authors' conceptions add to or extend a significant consideration in our understanding of reflection and reflective practice. Collectively, the literature on reflective practice reveals numerous common themes. Reflection is viewed as an active thought process aimed at understanding and subsequent improvement. Both personal and contextual variables influence the reflective process and outcomes. Reflection can occur in different ways and for different purposes. Reflection that considers social, moral, and ethical perspectives has the potential to affect community values and action.

What is reflective practice? Reflective practice is an inquiry approach to teaching that involves a personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement. A commitment to reflective practice indicates a willingness to accept responsibility for one's professional practice (Ross, 1990). Reflection is not "the mindless following of unexamined practices or principles" (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991, p. 37). It is not the "pointless reflection of one's navel as symbolized by Rodin's 'The Thinker' " (Bright, 1996, p. 166). It is not just getting together to talk about work or thinking self-reinforcing thoughts about how to teach.

There is no universally accepted definition of what reflective practice is, but numerous perspectives are offered in the literature, each of which has a slightly different emphasis. Listed here are perspectives that have been offered by different authors. Reflective practice can be considered

- "The practice or act of analyzing our actions, decisions, or products by focusing on our process of achieving them" (Killion & Todnem, 1991, p. 15)

TABLE 1.1 Significant Contributions to the Thinking About Reflective Practice

Dewey, 1938

- Considered the goal of education to be the development of reflective, creative, responsible thought (Hatton & Smith, 1995)

- Was interested in how people think when faced with real and relevant problems

- Viewed learning as an ongoing interaction between the individual and context

Van Manen, 1977

- Suggested three levels of reflectivity to describe various aims of reflection: *technical reflection,* which focuses on examining the skills, strategies, and methods used to reach predetermined goals (e.g., Is this the most effective way to accomplish this goal?); *practical reflection,* which focuses on examining the methods used to reach goals and also reexamining the goals themselves (e.g., Is this a worthy goal to strive for?); and *critical reflection,* which focuses on inquiring about the moral, ethical, and social equity aspects of practice (e.g., Does this promote equity, and for whom?)

Zeichner, 1987, 1993

- Argued the essential role of critical reflection in education, emphasizing that educators must critically examine how instructional and other school practices contribute to social equity and to the establishment of a just and human society

- Challenged the assumption that education will necessarily be better if teachers reflect, because reflection can validate and justify current practices that are harmful to students

Schon, 1983, 1987

- Described a "crisis in professional knowledge," referring to the gap between professional knowledge and actual competencies required for practicing teachers

- Used the terms *the swamp* to connote the ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity, and oftentimes conflicting values that define the daily teaching context, and *swamp knowledge* to describe the tacit knowledge teachers develop from construction and reconstruction of their swamp experiences

- Differentiated between *reflection-in-action,* referring to the process of observing our thinking and action as they are occurring, in order to make adjustments in the moment, and *reflection-on-action,* referring to the process of looking back on, and learning from, experience or action in order to affect future action (Note: Killion and Todnem (1991) expanded Schon's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action typology to include reflection-for-action)

TABLE 1.1 Continued

Smyth, 1989

- Suggested four forms of action that can guide reflection on practice: *describe* (e.g., What do I do?), *inform* (e.g., What does this mean?), *confront* (e.g., How did I come to think or act like this?), and *reconstruct* (e.g., How might I do things differently?)

Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993

- Emphasized the influence of underlying, personal-action theories on behavior

- Brought attention to consideration of the theories or views that individuals talk about (i.e., espoused theories) versus the theories or views that are evident in watching individuals behave (i.e., theories in use), suggesting reflective practices as a way to examine and uncover underlying theories and views that affect action

Sparks-Langer and Colton, 1993; Langer and Colton, 1994

- Identified multiple influences on the knowledge construction involved in reflective practice: experiential knowledge, professional knowledge, feelings, the surrounding collegial environment, and personal characteristics or attributes

- Introduced a cyclical process, referred to as the Framework for Developing Teacher Reflection, that includes these steps: Gather information about an experience or event; conduct analysis by considering multiple influencing variables; form hypotheses; and then test hypotheses through implementation

Butler, 1996

- Argued that professional development must be self-directed and that reflection is the central process for integrating knowledge and experience

- Expressed concern that externally prescribed training disempowers the problem-solving process of educators, thereby creating dependence on "the system" instead of promoting the internal capacities of practicing professionals

- "The capacity of a teacher to think creatively, imaginatively and in time, self-critically about classroom practice" (Lasley, 1992, p. 24)

- "Deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 40)

- "A genuinely critical, questioning orientation and a deep commitment to the discovery and analysis of positive and negative information concerning

the quality and status of a professional's designed action" (Bright, 1996, p. 165)

- "An active, proactive, reactive and action-based process" (Bright, 1996, p. 167)

- "A way of thinking about educational matters that involves the ability to make rational choices and to assume responsibility for these choices" (Ross, 1989, p. 22)

- "An active and deliberative cognitive process, involving sequences of interconnected ideas which take into account underlying beliefs and knowledge" (Dewey, as described in Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 34)

Drawing on the perspectives offered above and on our own work, we identify the following as elements of a comprehensive definition: Reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes. Practitioners use these processes for examining beliefs, goals, and practices, to gain new or deeper understandings that lead to actions that improve learning for students (see Figure 1.1). Actions may involve changes in behavior, skills, attitudes, or perspectives within an individual, partner, small group, or school. Each of these elements is described briefly here.

Reflective practice requires a *deliberate pause*, a purposeful slowing down of life to find time for reflection. To deliberately pause creates the psychological space and attention in which an open perspective can be held. Kahn (1992) emphasizes the importance of psychological presence as a requisite for individual learning and high-quality performance. In between a stimulus and a response is a moment of choice (Covey, 1989)—a pause during which options for actions can be considered. Human beings have the capacity to choose their responses to life's experiences (Frankl, 1959). When reflecting, people choose deliberately to pause as a precursor to considering appropriate responses.

An *open perspective* or open-mindedness (Dewey, 1933; Ross, 1990; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) means being open to other points of view. It means recognizing that represented within a group are many ways to view particular circumstances or events. It means being open to changing viewpoints and letting go of needing to be right or wanting to win (Webb, 1995). Rather, the purpose is to understand. Openness to other perspectives requires a mindful and flexible orientation. Mindful people are awake (Nhat Hanh, 1993) and conscious of thought and actions. Being awake includes having an awareness of others and extending learning beyond the immediate sphere. In education, awareness extends from immediate instructional circumstances to caring about democratic foundations and encouraging socially responsible actions (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1993). Doubt, perplexity, and tentativeness are part of openness (Dewey, 1933; Langer & Colton, 1994). An open perspective creates the possibility for the emergence of new understandings and increasingly more effective responses.

Reflection involves active and conscious *processing of thoughts*. Thinking processes, such as inquiry, metacognition, analysis, integration, and synthesis, may all

Figure 1.1. A Comprehensive Definition of Reflective Practice

be used in a reflective process. Reflection, for example, may take the form of self-observation and analysis of one's own behaviors and the perceived consequences. It may involve group members' being aware of their thoughts during a decision-making process for determining differentiated instructional objectives and strategies (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Higher-level thinking processes provide the means to move beyond a focus on isolated facts, events, or data to perceive a broader context for understanding.

The focus of reflection involves *examination of beliefs, goals, and practices.* Beliefs include people's values, visions, biases, and paradigms. Beliefs stem largely from one's experiences and significantly influence ways of thinking and behaving. Beliefs create the lens through which we view our worlds. Goals encompass desired aims, outcomes, or intentions. They can be very general or specific in nature. General goals may address such desires as creating a learning community for students. Specific goals may address more concrete and immediate aims, such as teaching children how to learn effectively in groups during social studies. *Practice* refers to one's repertoire of dispositions, behaviors, and skills in specific areas of perfor-

mance, such as designing instruction and assessment strategies, interacting with students, developing relationships with families, collaborating with colleagues, and implementing schoolwide reforms.

A desirable outgrowth of reflection is new or *deeper understanding and insights*. Such understanding provides the basis for considering new forms of action. Awareness and understanding are critical elements for initiating and sustaining change in practice. New understandings without changes in behavior, however, will not make differences in the lives of students. Application of knowledge is essential (Dewey, 1933; Smyth, 1989). Reflective practice leads to improvement only when deepened *understandings lead to action.*

Reflective practice provides a way "to understand and make sense of the world" (Brubacher, Case, & Reagan, 1994, p. 36). It is an active process. "Rather than reflective practice being seen as impractical, passive, or irrelevant to action, it can be regarded as centrally important and relevant to the understanding of ongoing action" (Bright, 1996, p. 167). It serves as the foundation for continuous learning and improvement in educational practice so that children are successful in school and in life. It is a complex process that requires high levels of conscious thought as well as a commitment to making changes based on new understandings of how to practice. Reflective practice must not be viewed as yet another bandwagon—here today, gone tomorrow. It has the potential to significantly improve education if its foundations and assumptions are honored. Unless the integrity of reflective practice is upheld, efforts at implementation will be superficial and will result in few positive gains.

What Is the Potential of Reflective Practice to Improve Schools?

Increasing evidence suggests what common sense has always told us: Student learning is linked with staff learning. This means that as staff members learn and improve their instructional practice, students benefit and show increases in learning (Richardson, 1997, 1998).

> The main objective of reflective practice is to ensure a more accurate and relevant understanding of a situation such that professionally designed action in that situation is more likely to produce effective, relevant action which will facilitate the occurrence of more desired and effective outcomes. (Bright, 1996, p. 177)

In education, the desired outcomes are increases in student learning and capacity to learn, with learning broadly conceptualized as including academic, social, and emotional well-being. High levels of student learning require high levels of staff competence. Reflective practice increases the potential of schools to improve for at least the following reasons:

- It creates the *opportunity to continuously learn* from and about educational practice. If educators do not reflect on and learn from their practice, they are likely to continue doing what they have been doing. Recall the old adage, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten."

- Practitioners have a *greater variety of perspectives* to draw on in addressing the many challenging and complex dilemmas of practice. Consideration of different perspectives can result in more effective solutions, which are more broadly understood, accepted, and implemented.

- *New knowledge and understandings* that have immediate applications to practice are created. Knowledge constructed within the context of practice is needed to effectively teach the increasing variety of school-age children and youth. By sharing newly constructed knowledge among colleagues, the impact for improvement can be multiplied.

- *Efficacy* increases as educators see the positive effects on their own context-generated solutions. Efficacy refers to the belief that one can make a difference in the lives of students. As the internal capacities of teachers are recognized and tapped, a greater sense of empowerment emerges.

- Professional educators themselves assume *personal responsibility for learning* and improvement. Rather than relying on the system for training programs to substantially improve or fix the instructional process, educators come to rely on themselves and one another.

- *Strengthened relationships and connections* among staff members emerge. As continuous improvement becomes a shared goal and reflection becomes embedded in practice, isolation is reduced, and relationships strengthen, giving rise to a foundation for schoolwide improvement.

- Educators can build *bridges between theory and practice*. They consider externally generated knowledge from the research community and then determine appropriate, customized applications or combinations of applications to their specific context of practice.

- *A reduction in external mandates* may ultimately result when educators are viewed as effectively addressing many of the challenges of practice. The belief that externally prescribed interventions must be mandated if schools are to improve could be challenged.

What Does It Mean to Be a Reflective Educator?

What do reflective educators look like? How do they behave? How would you know a reflective educator if you met one? One of the distinguishing characteristics of reflective educators is a high level of commitment to their own professional development (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). They have a sustained interest in learn-

ing. Inquiry, questioning, and discovery are norms embedded in their ways of thinking and practice (Bright, 1996; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Their inquiry focuses not only on the effectiveness of their instruction but also on the underlying assumptions, biases, and values that they bring to the educational process. They consider issues of justice, equity, and morality as they design and reflect on their practice. Their interest in learning is continually sparked by triggers of curiosity about some aspect of practice (Clarke, 1995). Instead of blindly accepting or rejecting new information or ideas, they carefully examine, analyze, and reframe them in terms of specific context variables, previous experiences, and alignments with desired educational goals (Clarke, 1995; Costa & Garmston, 1988; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Reflective educators are decision makers who develop thoughtful plans to move new understandings into action so that meaningful improvements result for students (Clarke, 1995; Costa & Garmston, 1988).

As described previously, the work of educators takes place in a dynamic, unpredictable, and sometimes ambiguous context. Reflective educators recognize that much of the knowledge about effective practice is tacit, meaning that it is learned from experience within the practice context. To learn in and from that context, reflective educators are keenly aware of their surrounding context, are open to and seek feedback, and can effectively distill the information that should be considered in a reflective process (Bright, 1996). We offer the profile of a reflective educator as one who

- Is committed to continuous improvement in practice

- Assumes responsibility for his or her own learning

- Demonstrates awareness of self, others, and the surrounding context

- Develops the thinking skills for effective inquiry

- Takes action that aligns with new understandings

Distinctions are appropriately made between reflective educators, also referred to as reflective practitioners, and experts, in terms of how knowledge is viewed and generated (Schon, 1987; Webb, 1995). Generally speaking, two major sources of knowledge to bring to bear on practice are externally generated knowledge and internally created knowledge. Externally generated knowledge comes by way of the research community and usually offers generalized findings, directions, and strategies for consideration by the practicing community. This is sometimes referred to as technical-rational or content knowledge. Internally created knowledge comes by way of reflecting on practice and customizing use of externally generated knowledge to unique contexts of practice, that is, specific schools, classes, and students. This is sometimes referred to as contextual knowledge.

Reflective practitioners draw largely from an experiential or contextual knowledge base in which "it is impossible to disentangle knowing from doing" (Webb, 1995, p. 71). Content experts draw largely from a technical-rational knowledge base (Schon, 1983). They are masters of content but may not have the practice

background that generates tacit knowledge about how to apply, use, or teach content in the classroom. Webb (1995) explains that from the technical-rational knowledge perspective of content experts,

> Professional practice rests upon an underlying discipline or basic science producing general theory and knowledge which the professional practitioner then applies to individual daily problems . . . [in] professional practice . . . knowing directs doing, and those who know are the experts. (p. 71)

This perspective explains some of the disconnect that educators sense when learning from experts of content who cannot make the application to the classroom context. It also speaks to the frustration or cynicism that can arise among practicing educators when content experts assume an easy transfer of technical-rational knowledge to the context of practice.

For some aspects of practice, educators draw on a technical-rational knowledge base, such as disciplinary expertise. For example, math teachers draw on the technical knowledge base of the discipline of mathematics. For many other aspects of daily practice, though, educators draw on their experientially and contextually derived knowledge from practice. Schon (1983) explains that when, as reflective practitioners,

> We go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of every day life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it, we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowledge is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action. (p. 9)

Both types of knowledge—content and context—are necessary to achieve excellence in practice. It is the job of the educators to adopt a reflective stance, to continually expand their understanding and repertoire of practice. In doing so they realize both the challenges and benefits of lifelong learning: "Significant learning generally involves fluctuating episodes of anxiety-producing self-scrutiny and energy-inducing leaps forward in ability and understanding" (Brookfield, 1992, p. 12). Such is the journey of a reflective educator.

The Reflective Practice Spiral

The reflective practice spiral (Figure 1.2) presents one way to think about initiating and expanding efforts to embed reflective practices as a cultural norm in schools. It

Figure 1.2. The Reflective Practice Spiral Illustrating Four Levels at Which Reflection Can Be Developed: Individual, Partner, Small Group or Team, and Schoolwide
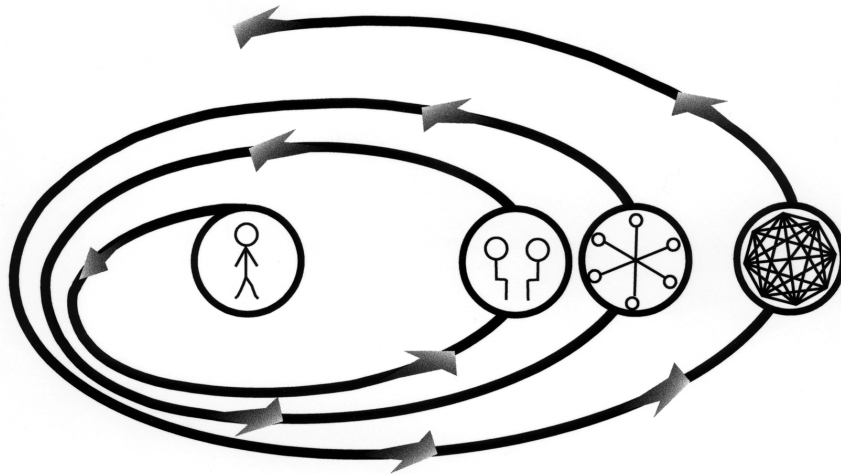
reflects an assumption that the place to begin is with oneself. The reflective practice spiral has four levels: individual, partner, small group or team, and school wide. The spiral that moves through the levels represents the interconnectedness among the levels, resulting in a cumulative effect on schoolwide practices. The innermost circle that illustrates just one person represents the individual level of the spiral. The partner level is represented in the second circle showing two individuals interacting. The small-group level is represented in the third circle, shown as six individuals connected around a common purpose in the center. The outermost circle in the spiral symbolizes schoolwide involvement as represented by a web of connections among people, which extends throughout the school.

Lived experience is perhaps the most powerful influence on the formation of beliefs and values, which are the driving forces behind actions. The positive growth that individuals experience from reflective practice provides a more solid foundation for advocacy and for the sustained commitment required to expand the practice of reflection beyond themselves. As we develop our individual reflection capacities, we can better influence the reflection that occurs with partners and in small groups or teams of which we are members. As more groups become reflective in their work, the influence of reflection begins to spread throughout the school. A critical mass of individuals who have experienced positive outcomes from their own reflective practice and from reflection within groups and teams can better support widespread adoption.

Each level in the reflective practice spiral is described below, along with the potential benefits at each level. Examples and specific considerations for implementation at each level are addressed in Chapters 3 through 6.

Individual Reflection

This is the level at which each of us, as an educator, has full responsibility and control and can choose to use reflective practices in our work and life. Reflection on our own provides each of us with the opportunity to realize the following gains:

- Improvements in educational practice, given greater awareness of personal performance, increased recognition of dilemmas that arise in practice, different ways of thinking about dilemmas, and resulting adjustments in practice

- Increased student learning and learning capacities, given improvements in personal practice

- Increased personal capacities for learning and improvement, as the skills and dispositions for reflective practice become embedded in our way of thinking and doing

- Restored balance and perspective, given the time-out created for reflection and the subsequent learning; learning is a great source of inspiration!

- Renewed clarity of personal and professional purpose, given a sense of empowerment to align our practice with purpose

Some ways to reflect alone include journaling, reviewing a case, reading professional literature, developing and reviewing a teaching portfolio, exercising, and observing or listening to one's own practice through use of videotapes or audiotapes. Chapter 3 contains additional considerations and specific examples of individual reflective practice. When beginning to learn more about reflective practice and its potential, through individual experience, we are in a position to more effectively assist others in creating and supporting the development of reflective capacities in others. In doing so, our own reflection and learning are also enriched.

Reflection With Partners

Joining with another person in the process of reflection can result in greater insight about one's practice, especially when trust is high, and the right combination of support and challenge is present. Partner reflection can also introduce an element of fun. Humor, when appropriately interjected, can remind us not to take ourselves too seriously and to remember that mistakes are an inevitable part of the ongoing learning and improvement process. In addition to the gains that can be

realized at the individual level of reflection, adding a partner to the reflection process can result in

- Expanded learning and confidence about our own practice, given the different perspective of another person and the assistance of coaching, a process of inquiry
- Increased professional and social support and decreased feelings of isolation at work, given the presence of a strengthened collegial relationship
- An increased sense of who we are and how things work in our school, given the connection and exchange with another person who also experiences life in our place of work
- Greater commitment to work and the work environment, given our increased feelings of confidence and connection to another person in the place of work

Some ways that two people can reflect together include interactive journaling, cognitive coaching, conversing about instructional design possibilities, talking through steps of an inquiry cycle related to specific events or dilemmas, reading and talking about articles or case studies, examining student work, and even reflecting with a partner online. Chapter 5 contains additional considerations and specific examples of reflective practice for partners. The increased sense of competence, support, and connection that can emerge from reflection with a partner positions us on more solid ground to extend the practice of reflection to small groups.

Reflection in Small Groups and Teams

There is a big shift from reflecting alone or with a partner to reflecting in a small group, such as a team or committee. While the potential impact of reflection increases, so does personal risk. Because more people are in a group, the sense of safety and connection between individuals is not the same as in partner reflection. Groups and teams are also frequently appointed or mandated, whereas partner reflection is usually more voluntary and self-organized. In appointed or mandated groups, there is frequently less control over two important factors: the individuals who are present and the commitment and desire to participate. Composition and commitment affect interactions and outcomes.

Despite the risks involved in expanding reflective practice to such groups, good reasons exist to venture forth into this domain. When reflection becomes part of educational practice within a small group, its members can realize the following gains:

- Enhanced learning and resources for learning about practice, given the expanded number of individuals—each of whom brings varied experiences and expertise in life, learning, and education

- Increased professional and social support, given the expanded network of collegial relationships

- More effective interventions for individual students or groups of identified students, given shared purpose, responsibility, and expertise among members of a group

- Emerging sense of hope and encouragement that meaningful and sustained improvements in practice can occur, given that members in a group are working and learning together

- Improved climate and collegiality, given greater understanding of our own and others' experiences and perspectives about our shared place of work

Some ways to reflect in a small group include action research, study groups, regular grade-level or content-area meetings to review and design instructional and assessment procedures, and case-study reviews. Reflective practices can also enhance committee work by intentionally engaging in reflection about past practices and future possibilities and by soliciting the perspectives of people representing broad interests in the respective work. Arguably, committees that form to address building-wide concerns such as space, scheduling, extracurricular activities, and remedial supports for learning would be more effective if reflection and learning were an embedded part of the committee process. Within groups, it is often appropriate to include a participatory reflection process that focuses on how the group is working together and accomplishing its objectives. Refer to Chapter 5 for more considerations and specific examples of reflective practice in groups or teams.

At the small-group level of reflective practice, the potential to influence more broadly the educational practices begins to emerge within and throughout the school. Small ripples of change frequently become the impetus for much broader changes, even when that was not an original intent (Garmston & Wellman, 1995; Wheatley, 1992). The potential to improve educational practices significantly increases when multiple groups and teams succeed in embedding reflective practices in their work, and when efforts expand to include the vast majority of individuals and groups in a school.

Schoolwide Reflective Practice

The greatest potential for reflective practice to improve schools lies with the collective understanding, thinking, learning, and acting that result from schoolwide engagement. Over the past decade, emphasis on schoolwide, as opposed to

isolated, improvement efforts has increased (e.g., Calhoun, 1994). Isolated efforts (e.g., initiatives taken on by individual teachers, grade levels, or content areas) typically result in only isolated improvements, with few cumulative gains realized once students move on from those experiences. Furthermore, effects do not spread to other groups of students without intentional efforts to design and implement new practices with those students. These are some of the reasons for the emergence of practices intended to promote professional community, focused on increasing student learning (Fullan, 2000a; Hord, 1997; King & Newmann, 2000; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). When reflection becomes part of educational practice on a schoolwide basis, the following gains can be realized:

- Greatly expanded learning opportunities, resources, and the potential to achieve schoolwide improvements in educational practice
- Enhanced communication about students among teachers within and across grade levels and curricular areas
- Increased professional and social support through the expanded network of relationships and understanding of others' experiences at work
- Increased sense of shared purpose and responsibility to all students
- Increased understanding of how the school works and how schoolwide improvement efforts might be successful
- Increased sense of possibility for meaningful and sustained improvements in practice, given expanded awareness of the commitments and talents of a broad network of people in the school

Reflective practices at the schoolwide level can take many forms. An entire school staff may be involved in study groups on a common topic, such as reading in content areas or performance assessment. There might also be groups or teams across the school with varied purposes. For example, interdisciplinary groups could form to share disciplinary expertise and to create a set of integrated student outcomes that would be addressed within each of the content areas or to evaluate the design and effectiveness of a specific initiative. Cross-grade-level teams might explore the best practices for effective student transitions between grades or schools. Some issues require schoolwide attention and participation, so group composition should be intentionally designed to connect people across grade levels or curricular areas to bring forth different perspectives. This also results in relationships forming between individuals who may not typically cross paths during a school day. It is neither possible nor necessary to include every staff member in every learning or shared-work initiative. What matters most is that staff members are involved in some type of learning or shared-work initiative, in addition to being committed to their continued professional development and improvement. Chapter 6 contains additional considerations and specific examples of reflective practice at the school level.

## Moving Outward in the Reflective Practice Spiral

As reflective practice grows from the center of the reflective practice spiral, moving from the individual toward the schoolwide level, there is greater potential to affect schoolwide change. The potential at the outer levels is based on the assumption that individuals continue to enhance their own reflection and learning. Resources, information, perspectives, ownership, commitment, relationships, and shared leadership increase substantially because greater numbers of staff members are involved and learning together.

As reflective practice spirals out from the center, challenges to effective implementation are greater. Complexity is dramatically increased due to the greater numbers of people involved. Interpersonal dynamics become a greater force. Logistics, such as scheduling time for reflection, become more difficult. Individual risk is greater because an individual's perspectives are exposed to a greater number of people with whom there may be varying degrees of trust, respect, and commitment. The surrounding context and climate of a school also have a greater effect as practices expand to include more people. There are long-standing structures that reinforce isolation. The history and established cultures within and across groups create invisible barriers to interaction. Multiple and often competing priorities for time and professional development can fragment focus, effort, and people. In addition, lack of support from formal and informal leaders in the building undermines efforts to move forward. In short, as the individual moves out in the spiral, there is more potential but also more complexity and less control.

Recognizing the presence of significant, complicating variables at the school level can raise serious doubts about the feasibility of reflective practice. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the inherently complex nature of schoolwide change. This is one of the reasons that the reflective practice spiral is proposed as a guiding framework. We can choose to remain committed to our own professional learning and improvement by embedding reflective practices in their lives. We can at least engage in reflective practices at the individual level. Choosing to assume a responsible, proactive stance toward our own development adds positive energy to our lives and to the environments in which we work. As individuals, we reap the benefits of continuous learning, and we increase our professional competence. Learning also renews our spirit. Our human needs to learn and grow can be met, in part, through reflective practices. A commitment to the individual level of reflective practice is beneficial for us as individuals and also has an indirect effect on others.

Beyond the individual, then, the potential for improvement in schools increases with each additional person who chooses to make a commitment to professional learning and improvement. Recent understandings about how organizations or systems evolve suggest that significant changes arise through the relationships and interactions among people (Garmston & Wellman, 1995; Wheatley, 1992). Also suggested is that change happens in ways we cannot predict or control. As each of us continues to learn, and as we reach out to connect and learn with others,

Figure 1.3. A Web of Relationships Among Staff Members, Which Is Expanded and Strengthened Through Reflective Practice
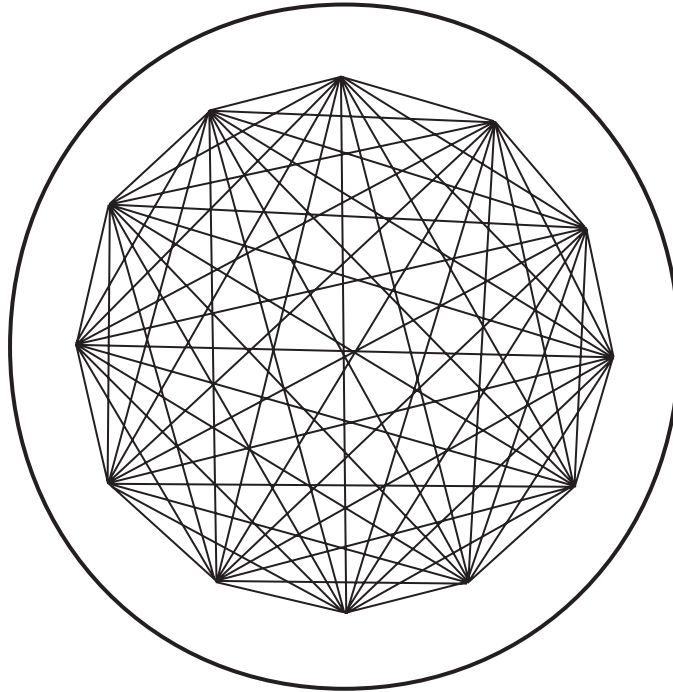
relationships form and strengthen, thereby increasing the potential for improvement on a larger scale.

Combinations of different groups of staff members learning together throughout the school result in expanded and strengthened relationships among all staff members. In effect, a *web of relationships* forms to facilitate communication and connection throughout the school community (Figure 1.3). This web of relationships serves several very important functions: (a) A safety net is created for students, who are less likely to feel anonymous and fragmented because staff members are in better communication about students, especially those who are struggling in school; (b) a rich network of resources—people and information—is formed, and any member of the school community can tap it; if someone in our immediate network does not know something, we are likely to be connected to someone in another network who may know; and (c) when we are more tightly coupled with others in our work, there is a greater likelihood of more comprehensive, effective, and rapid response to schoolwide issues, ranging from safety concerns to adoption of new curricula. To enhance the web metaphor for school improvement, consider

that the threads of weaver spiders are one of the strongest organic materials that nature produces. In laboratories, scientists harvest the threads and weave them into bullet-proof vests. Thus the web is an apt metaphor for the durable and protective community that emerges and spreads from the spinning of many individuals.

To envision how the web of relationships can accomplish these important functions, look at Figure 1.3 and think of it as representing a well-connected and effective community of educators in a school. Now picture something falling onto the web. The specific something could be a student with unique challenges, a new program or curriculum, or new teachers. Because of all the interconnections, whatever falls onto the strands of the web is caught. The web flexes to accommodate its presence, so it does not fall to the ground underneath. Every connection (relationship) in the web knows that something new has arrived and can offer resources and support. Without these connections, whatever lands in the school (web) falls to the ground and is on its own to establish the connections needed to survive. A web of relationships can embrace a new presence, connect it to the broader community, and bring forth resources needed to effectively interact with or respond to the new presence in the web. Reflective practice is one significant means of forming and strengthening the relationships, which are the verbal, social, behavioral, and emotional connections that constitute the web.

Closing

Education is about learning—not only student learning but also staff learning. Learning is a function of reflection. "Adults do not learn from experience, they learn from processing experience" (Arin-Krupp as cited in Garmston & Wellman, 1997, p. 1). Dewey asserted years ago that experience itself is not enough. Ten years of teaching can be 10 years of learning from experience with continuous improvement, or it can be 1 year with no learning repeated 10 times. Learning and improvement can no longer be optional. Reflection, therefore, must be at the center of individual and organizational improvement initiatives.

Reflective practice offers one powerful way for educators—individually and collectively—to stay challenged, effective, and alive in their work. The greater the number of people involved, the greater the potential to significantly improve educational practice and, therefore, the greater the potential to enhance student learning. Figure 1.4 identifies staff resources that emerge when educators in a school join together to reflect and learn, with a commitment to continuous improvement. Despite the hectic pace and the steady demands, increasing numbers of educators are making it a priority to create space in their professional lives for reflection and learning. In doing so, they are being nurtured to grow and are expanding their repertoire of effective instructional practices. They are moving from a culture of doing to a culture of learning.

Figure 1.4. Staff Resources for Student Learning That Are Enhanced Through Reflective Practice
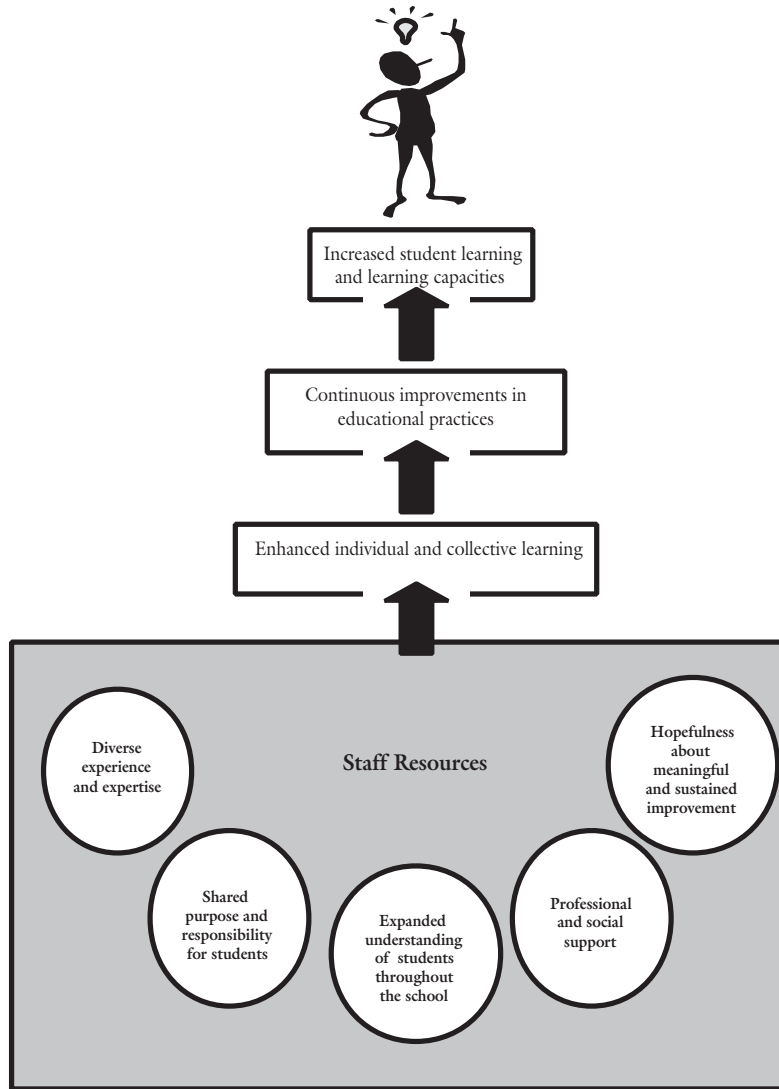
You are invited to use the Chapter Reflection: Capturing Your Thoughts form (Figure 1.5) to make note of significant learning or insights sparked from reading Chapter 1. In the next chapter, the focus shifts away from the foundational elements of reflective practice to focus on strategies and tools to promote reflection. Specifically, personal capacities that promote reflection will be described along with other essential elements to consider in the design and implementation of reflective practices to improve schools.

Figure 1.5. Chapter Reflection: Capturing Your Thoughts

Capture Your Thoughts

★ Big Ideas	💡 Specific Insights
? Questions Raised	➡ Implications for Action