

CHAPTER 1

INQUIRY-DRIVEN INNOVATION: An Introduction

The school library offered cozy spaces for students to settle down with a book or study quietly. Colorful posters adorned the walls. One particularly prominent poster used giant letters to offer this exclamation: “Take time today to LEARN something NEW!” Now, however, as early morning sunshine streamed through the windows, adults rather than children were gathered in groups among the bookcases. They were part of a two-year collaborative research project exploring inquiry and innovation in education. Study groups from seven schools serving different communities across the K–12 spectrum within the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were participating in this project, including today’s host school located off Dubai’s busy Sheikh Zayed Road. They were convened for one of the project’s tri-annual in-person gatherings that included *exhibitions* of each school’s work. A genuine buzz filled the room: participating educators expressed excitement about the opportunity to catch up with one another and to find out how their different innovation projects were progressing. There was also a palpable sense of being engaged in work that mattered—not to mention a small dose of friendly competition.

The innovation projects on display were varied: one was about promoting the use of *thinking routines*¹ across grade levels to make student thinking more visible; another involved the development of a schoolwide rubric to promote critical thinking; another was about pro-

moting positive dispositions with regard to online learning; yet another was about introducing student-led assessment; and a further one presented the idea of using the local landscape to establish a “desert school” (a tortoise crawled through the space to bring life to this proposal). Working together in small groups—called *study groups*—the participating teachers and administrators had been engaging in the process of *inquiry-driven innovation* for about a year. As part of that process, each study group had spent months learning to look at its teaching and learning contexts with fresh eyes. The groups had collectively identified potential changes they would like to see in their schools, established an inquiry focus, and then developed innovations to help make those changes happen. They had piloted their innovations and were now iterating on their initial designs. This morning they had brought along posters and visual displays to update the other study groups about their work, as well as to receive and offer constructive feedback. What did they most appreciate about one another’s innovation projects? What connections were they making to their own? What puzzles or questions did they have? The educators listened attentively to one another.



Three Key Elements: Innovation + Inquiry + Community

This book is about inquiry-driven innovation: an ongoing process that empowers individuals and communities to pursue positive school-based change that is relevant and responsive to local contexts. Three key elements are integral to the Framework for Inquiry-Driven Innovation: innovation, inquiry, and community. Given the demands of our fast-changing contemporary society—and the need to prepare young people for the complexities and challenges of the world in which they are growing up—each of these elements has been acknowledged as vitally important in schools. Innovation, inquiry, and community are integrated within this framework in a way that both builds on and extends current thinking and practice, as discussed in the chapter that follows. Importantly, while the collaborative research that led to the development of the framework was initially focused on promoting innovation, it quickly became apparent that the professional growth—or “lift”—that the participating teachers and administrators reported experiencing was tightly bound up in the process. This book is therefore as much about empowering individual educators as it is about promoting innovation in schools. Powerful professional development and positive school-based change, as others have pointed out, go hand in

hand (e.g., Schleicher, 2011) and the Framework for Inquiry-Driven Innovation offers a fresh approach to strategically combining them to the advantage of both. It is important to note that this book takes a highly expansive view of what counts as innovation, interpreting it as the act of trying out anything that is new within a given school context, even if it involves practices that are quite commonplace elsewhere. This and other key terms are defined as they are used in the book in the Glossary at the end of the book. Additionally, the term *educator* is used throughout the book to refer to both classroom teachers and administrators.

The framework consists of key concepts and principles, a suggested process or “roadmap” for enacting inquiry-driven innovation, and a range of over twenty practicable tools that were collaboratively designed and field tested with educators engaged in a design-based research project called Creating Communities of Innovation led by the Project Zero research center at Harvard Graduate School of Education in collaboration with GEMS Education.² The framework is intended to be used flexibly and to serve educational practitioners working at any grade level and with any content area or curriculum. A series of case studies and *innovation journeys* in Part Two shows how the framework can play out in different ways according to the local school context and the team of practitioners engaged with it. Part Two also includes an examination of the ways in which individuals experienced professional growth through this work.

This opening chapter introduces the overall concept and essential qualities of inquiry-driven innovation. It also previews the contents of the rest of the book, offering suggestions on how to read and use it. The following chapter describes how the Framework for Inquiry-Driven Innovation was developed and loosely situates the framework within the broader educational landscape.

Figure 1.1 shows how the elements of innovation, inquiry, and community are tightly connected and mutually supportive within the framework.

This book shows how:

- Innovation practices are enhanced when educators use an inquiry approach to pursue locally relevant innovations in collaboration with one another and in the service of specific communities about which they know and care.



Figure 1.1 The key elements of inquiry-driven innovation.

- Inquiry practices are enhanced when they are focused on innovation projects that are meaningful to a group of participants who have the opportunity to learn both with and from one another.
- Community-building or collaboration practices are enhanced when there is a clear purpose for educators to work toward collectively and they are given relative autonomy to promote change that is meaningful to them and their communities.
- Individual teacher professional development and community building or collaboration practices are mutually supportive: while this book emphasizes the collective pursuit of inquiry-driven innovation, it also features powerful stories of individual growth.

The Five Principles of Inquiry-Driven Innovation

Now it is time to unpack the five key principles that are integral to the Framework for Inquiry-Driven Innovation. As Figure 1.2 shows, the framework promotes work that is purposeful and intentional, attentive to multiple perspectives, adapted to the context, sustained and iterative, and structured and supported. No one principle is more important than the others and all connect to form a coherent whole, encircled by the key elements of innovation, inquiry, and community.

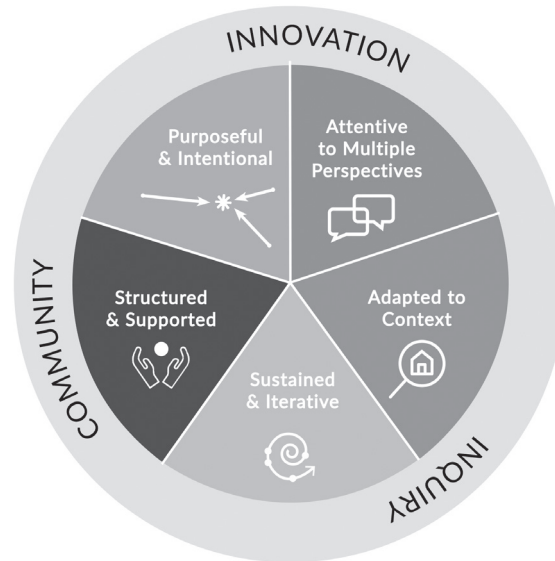


Figure 1.2 The key elements and principles of inquiry-driven innovation.

Principle #1: Inquiry-driven innovation is purposeful and intentional

It addresses a specific need or interest and involves deliberate design choices throughout the process.

The framework supports educators to work on innovation projects that address a specific need or interest—that is, to develop innovations that are purposeful and explicitly designed to promote positive change within their local contexts rather than innovating for innovation’s sake. For the schools featured in this book, this kind of positive change meant different things. In one school, it meant radically overhauling kindergarten teaching practices to enable young learners to express their ideas and develop a passion for inquiry. In another, it meant promoting critical-thinking skills across the curriculum to improve students’ capacity for analysis and discussion. In still another, it meant supporting students to develop positive dispositions toward online learning so that they could take greater advantage of the school’s blended learning model.

Educators are also encouraged to be intentional throughout the process in terms of making choices or decisions that seek to advance the intended purpose of their innovation.