S omething unfortunate happens to U.S. teachers when they join the profession. They encounter a culture that forgets teachers are also learners. They enter a world consumed by results and disinterested in process. They join communities that celebrate exemplars and disguise imperfections. They spend long hours in isolated classrooms with minimal time for collaboration or observation. They work in systems that evaluate compliance rather than assist performance. They inherit values and routines that stymie professional growth and discourage continuous improvement.

Working under these conditions, the majority of teachers in U.S. schools have carried out the pursuit of improvement in isolation, without much intentional support or systematic process of study. Faced with the perfect storm of multiple responsibilities and limited time, teachers work through daily cycles of teaching—planning, implementing, and making adjustments as needed—but rarely have opportunities to pause and reflect, or articulate findings about instructional practice. As a result, most teachers acquire knowledge about practice through sporadic moments of reflection in the midst of frenzied daily routines.

A Vision for Teaching Better

What if instead of individuals working on improvement in isolation, the familiar teaching cycle became a joint activity? What if teachers deliberately and continually pursued instructional improvement goals in a focused, collaborative context alongside colleagues who shared the same needs, concerns, and aspirations for *teaching better*? Examples such as Japanese *lesson study* and other carefully designed models of *collaborative instructional inquiry* provide convincing evidence that such an approach can change teaching and improve achievement (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Lewis, Perry, Friedkin, & Roth, 2012; Perry & Lewis, 2011; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009; Weinbaum et al., 2004). National organizations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (2013), Learning Forward (2011), and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Carroll, Fulton, & Doerr, 2010), have also emphasized ongoing, job-embedded, reflective practice in their recommendations and standards for professional

learning. And numerous authors have outlined essential practices for professional learning communities and continuous professional development (e.g., Lieberman & Miller, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Depth and Detail Lost in Translation

Growing interest in continuous improvement is a hopeful sign of shifting policy and priorities, but maintaining depth and quality with local implementation is proving difficult to achieve. Many schools and districts have adopted superficial aspects of these ideas, but at a deep level of school culture, they remain devalued and misunderstood. Terms such as *reflective practice*, *lesson study*, and *collaborative inquiry* are in popular use, but their underlying concepts and processes remain so loosely defined and broadly interpreted that they rarely produce intended results. Instead, they function as buzzwords that conceal the depth and promise of powerful improvement activities. In dozens of schools we visited across the nation, we observed teachers engaged in collaborative settings, but their efforts were constrained by hasty implementation, enduring cultural scripts, poorly defined processes, and insufficient support. We watched administrators and teacher leaders struggle, without guidance and resources, to translate the promise of lesson study and collaborative inquiry into concrete, effective action.

Reframing Instructional Improvement

This book provides a series of rich artistic images, instructive metaphors, and detailed examples of collaborative instructional inquiry in action by real teachers, in real schools, facing real problems. It also provides practical resources and specific strategies to help school leaders nurture and sustain instructional improvement. The content is organized around seven inspirational portraits (symbolic images and metaphors) that further define and clarify the steady, continuous work of improving teaching. Each chapter leads off with a high school student's artistic representation of the "improvement portrait" followed by a corresponding key principle that serves as the focal point for the chapter (see Table 1). Symbolically enhanced through the artwork, these images and metaphors help to *reframe* educators' understanding of collaborative inquiry and illuminate important details for what that work can and should look like.

Later in each chapter, a corresponding key segment of text (typically one to two pages) provides a detailed description of the portrait's symbolism and meaning as it relates to the chapter's content. Each description is strategically placed at different points in the chapter narrative, depending on

■ Table 1: Improvement Portraits and Key Principles

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Portrait #1: **Rotting Ship at Sea** *Key Principle:* Systematic improvement requires a balance of urgency and intentionality: urgency to pursue and resolve compelling problems but patience and discipline to investigate one plank at a time.	
Portrait #2: **Rich Drop of Food Coloring** *Key Principle:* Steady, concentrated effort over time produces a rich, permeating, and lasting effect.	
Portrait #3: **Japanese Toothpick *(Tsumayōji)*** *Key Principle:* "Seeing that something can be completely different is one of the most effective ways of opening eyes to the ubiquity of cultural practices and creating the circumstances for change" (Gallimore & Stigler, 2003, p. 27).	
Portrait #4: **Virtual Treasure Chest** *Key Principle:* Hard-won assets of local knowledge should be diligently pursued, continually refined, and globally shared.	
Portrait #5: **Winter Horseshoes** *Key Principle:* Investments in bold ideas should be matched by an equal investment in support and attention to detail.	
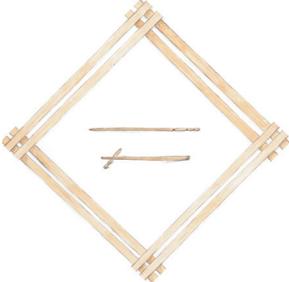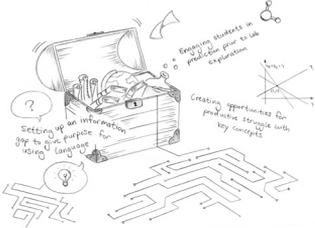
(Continued)

■ **Table 1: (Continued)**

Portrait #6: **Joint Productive Activity (JPA)** *Key Principle:* Power is multiplied to the fullest extent when we work together productively.	
Portrait #7: **5000 Reasons to Quit** *Key Principle:* The pursuit of teaching better is an arduous race demanding courage and commitment to remain stubborn for a long time.	

whether the portrait is better understood when preceded by other narrative content or as a backdrop for subsequent content and ideas.

Integrating Portraits, Principles, and Stories

Each of these *improvement portraits* is combined with detailed implementation stories from our K–12 research and experience in both Japan and the United States. These case studies and stories bring the images to life through unfolding narrative and concrete application of the key principles.

The first half of the book (Chapters 1–3) draws heavily on our extended research and experience with Japanese lesson study, featuring our firsthand accounts from Japan and a detailed case study of U.S. teachers working to adopt the Japanese model. The stories and examples in these chapters provide a clear, alternative image of collaborative instructional inquiry from a culture with a rich history and deeply established system for steady, instructional change. As we quote in Chapter 3, "Seeing that something can be completely different is one of the most effective ways of opening

eyes to the ubiquity of cultural practices and creating the circumstances for change" (Gallimore & Stigler, 2003, p. 27).

Chapter 1 includes short anecdotes of purposeful technology integration from 17 videotaped lessons and interviews we conducted in Japanese classrooms. Building on these anecdotes, it presents the case for slow, steady, incremental improvement and the need to balance urgency with intentionality.

Chapter 2 is a firsthand account of our experience as U.S. educators immersed in lesson study at a Japanese school. Drawing on this unique, inside perspective, it describes the critical skills and mindsets required to study and learn from teaching.

Chapter 3 expands on these examples from Japan with a detailed case study of veteran U.S. teachers engaged in a successful science lesson study project. It carefully traces the implementation efforts of each participant and describes the conditions that enabled teachers to make significant changes in practice.

The second half of the book (Chapters 4–7) features a broad range of U.S. examples from different inquiry contexts. These chapters focus on overcoming the challenges and constraints of engaging in collaborative inquiry and highlight specific guidance and strategies for sustaining improvement efforts.

Chapter 4 opens with research observations from a middle school algebra team that struggled to adopt new methods for conceptual teaching. It explains why expansive changes in teaching are difficult to scale, cautions against emphasis on "best practices," and highlights the potential of inquiry-based digital libraries for stimulating growth in knowledge and judgment. It also includes an example of a high school algebra team that used video resources from a digital library to study and implement a more conceptual lesson approach.

Chapter 5 presents a detailed explanation of strategies school leaders can employ to nurture and sustain school-wide collaborative inquiry. It includes a reconceived framework for leadership and assistance, practical tools for organizing settings and distributing support, and concrete suggestions for coauthoring narratives that help teachers reflect on their practice.

Chapter 6 illustrates the power of JPA through two stories of teams (a cross-curricular middle school team and a world language team)

that used focused, collaborative inquiry to overcome complex group dynamics and a history of unproductive meetings. Both teams revived their collaborative settings by making a commitment to shared learning goals and refocusing meetings on structured cycles of planning, teaching, and analysis.

Chapter 7 concludes with six compelling vignettes of teachers (special education, English as a second language, math, science, and two coaches) who inspired others through their courageous commitment to teaching, unwavering compassion for students, and enduring focus on improvement.

With the exception of the last two stories in Chapter 7, all school and teacher names in the book have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Practitioner Resources and Context for Use

This book is not limited to a particular inquiry program or model but is designed to support any collaborative instructional inquiry context. As such, it functions as a unique, stand-alone resource but also a terrific companion resource for any manual, handbook, or text that outlines processes and protocols for the collaborative study of teaching.

While not specifically an implementation guide, the book includes a useful set of practitioner resources to help readers translate the ideas into action, including reflection questions for each chapter and a Leader's Guide (see Appendix) with presentation ideas, facilitation notes, and application exercises for each improvement portrait. Chapters 3 through 6 also include templates and tools for establishing teams, coordinating support, and stimulating growth over time. The companion website features full-color, digital versions of each improvement portrait as well as customizable templates, slides, and resources readers can download and adapt for their specific implementation contexts. While organized in a purposeful sequence and progression, the chapters are also self-contained. They can be strategically selected for group study and discussion or read in any order that the group finds beneficial.

Who Should Read This Book?

The images, stories, and resources presented here are intended for educators across various levels of the system who commonly share a

responsibility, commitment, or interest in pursuing the improvement of teaching, or perhaps a desire to reconnect with the passion that sparked initial interest in the profession. This includes school-site leaders who shoulder responsibility for professional learning and instructional improvement; subject-area or grade-level leaders working to engage colleagues in productive collaboration and inquiry; district, county, or state-level administrators supporting curriculum, instruction, and professional growth; professors of education and directors of preservice programs preparing educators for continuous learning throughout their careers; and classroom teachers collaborating with a peer or mentor on individual inquiry projects. While the majority of stories and examples describe middle and high school implementation, the concepts and resources are readily applicable for any K–12 context or grade span.

The set of improvement portraits and corresponding key principles are also relevant and applicable for anyone in a teaching role (director, supervisor, counselor, mentor, coach, therapist, or pastor) who strives to advance the learning and betterment of others.

The Continuous Pursuit

Teaching better implies a perpetual pursuit of improvement. It suggests that we never "arrive" at a point of complete mastery but are continuously and relentlessly in search of enhancing our craft. We hope these portraits and stories will inspire you in that journey . . . to continue, to renew, or perhaps even to begin that pursuit.

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