

Enacting Equity through Action Research in Professional Development Schools (PDS)

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Abstract: The 12 action research articles in this special issue of *School-University Partnerships*, themed “The Impact of Teacher Leadership on Student Learning in Professional Development Schools,” illustrate that the tangible, practical goal of ensuring equity among teacher practice and student outcomes is fundamental to what it means to be a PDS. This closing article links several of these action research projects to NAPDS Essential 1 by describing how these PDS partnerships used action research to develop healthy teacher leadership habits, yield positive student learning outcomes, and increase opportunities to enact equity.

KEYWORDS: *action research, equity, professional development schools (PDS), teacher-researcher*

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community.

In P-12 (pre-school through high school) education, change and innovation efforts are increasingly focused on diversity, equity, and inclusivity to address persistent problems of practice around teaching and learning. The 12 action research articles reported in this special issue of *School-University Partnerships*, themed “The Impact of Teacher Leadership on Student Learning in Professional Development Schools,” illustrate that the tangible, practical goal of ensuring equity among teacher practice and student outcomes is fundamental to what it means to be a PDS.

Because PDS partnerships provide an ideal backdrop for addressing practical problems around equity in realistic ways (Corrigan, Weber, Beebe, Zenkov, & Semple, 2017; Fall, 2018), the potential is great for PDS models to address the unique needs of marginalized students (Benson, Curlette, Ogletree, & Hendrick, 2017; Putman, Cassady, Smith, & Heller, 2016; Rowe, Urban, & Middleton, 2016). Recognizing this, Essential 1 of the National Association for Professional Development Schools’ Nine Essentials of PDS advocates for “a comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community” (NAPDS, 2008, p. 2). This closing article links several of the themed issue’s action research projects to NAPDS Essential 1 by describing how these PDS partnerships used action research to develop healthy teacher leadership habits, yield positive student learning outcomes, and increase opportunities to enact equity.

Equity in Professional Development Schools

As the articles in this themed issue illustrate, PDS partnerships trust the experiences and influences of teacher leader-generated research to establish policies and procedures that drive education decisions. Instructional personnel are no longer satisfied with top-down administrative mandates that demonstrate lack of regard for classroom-based knowledge and expertise. Teacher leaders are motivated to craft their own solutions to problems they face daily and are especially prone to embrace improvement ideas that are generated through collaborative innovation (Hunzicker, 2013, 2017; Jeffries, 2018). The articles in this themed issue indicate that combined efforts of teacher leaders and university faculty grounded in an ethic of social justice are effective toward improving educational outcomes for students. These partnerships are effective because they continuously examine classroom practice as the nexus of student success by turning a critical lens on schools as institutions of continuity and classrooms as initial sites for powerful change.

Action research illustrates the relevance of P-12 education institutions to create spaces for inclusivity to a wide breadth of students so that the diverse academic needs of students in classroom settings can be addressed. Unfortunately, many institutions writ large are still striving to effectively utilize the existing theoretical findings that have permeated the literature for decades (Banks, 1979, 1982; Boutte, 2008; Carlson, 1987; Gay, 2004; Hollins, King & Hayman, 1994; Jackson, 2009; 2018; Ladson Billings, 1995, 2009; Noblit, 1993). Action research exposes areas for growth and development regarding the need to effectively incorporate instructional methods that acknowledge diversity in its many forms.

Educators who successfully use theory within a cyclical pattern to design policy that evolves from daily practice to support continuous explorations of instructional expertise are the engine of PDS partnerships. With an overt commitment to continued improvement, PDS research is expanding its goal of improving teacher practice by acknowledging this fundamental responsibility that classroom leaders partnering with university faculty must embody and enact equity. At this practical level, educators can more swiftly utilize diverse perspectives to build theory and influence decision making spaces where policy is born. Such action research settings offer opportunities to disrupt pervasive inequities in education and inform not only P-12 teaching and learning opportunities but also teacher training programs in higher education (Chevalier, & Buckles, 2019; Málovics, Juhász, Méreiné Berki, Mihók, Szentistványi, Pataki, Nagy & Tóth, 2018).

Enacting and Embodying Equity through Action Research

This themed issue includes strong examples of effective PDS partnerships that have developed healthy teacher leadership habits, yielded positive student learning outcomes, and increased opportunities to enact equity. For example, Meritt and Spreer utilized their PDS partnership to investigate fourth-grade students' reading motivation. Their study revealed that teachers are better equipped to address the diverse needs of students once they understand their students' home communities and environments. Students' contextual lives in and out of school influence their relationship to reading texts and literacy in general. Findings from this research suggested that direct adjustments to instruction, which included expanding the classroom library with relatable texts to foster student-oriented discussions, increased literacy engagement for

diverse learners. Ultimately, this action research process was noted by the authors as cyclical in nature because it tested existing theories about literacy and facilitated the generation of new literacy practices across multiple content areas.

Many of the contributions to this themed issue successfully examined the process of conducting action research to support the cyclical nature of examining practice, testing theory, and generating policy in PDS settings. These sites of proactive contestation nurture the focused intent of PDS partnerships to improve learning, teaching, and leading around issues of diversity, inclusivity and equity. As another example, the assumption that gifted students are virtually capable of teaching themselves and therefore not rightfully positioned among the group of students considered diverse; the action research project conducted by the Polly led partnership explored the delicate association between motivation and growth mindset with third-grade gifted math students. Teacher leaders and candidates learned the value of differentiated and personalized instruction to keep gifted students engaged through choice and applied lessons. This action research project demonstrated that guiding encouragement from the classroom teacher supported persistence through complex and multi-step mathematical tasks. The outcomes of this study recommended the systematic examination of practice, but more importantly noted the positive outcome measures bolstered by the qualifications of the participant teachers. An increased sense of confidence gave these teacher-researchers credibility among their administrative colleagues to drive decision making and help set policy.

Conversely, the PDS partnership led by Mallon explored the self-confidence and participation of fifth-grade special education students with the goal of increasing their range of strategies for heightened engagement during whole class instruction. This action research study successfully noted methods that teachers can use to assist diverse groups of students recognize areas where they experience difficulty and specific skills to address identified areas for growth. The findings of this study highlight the importance of teaching normalized social skills used in school settings to a range of students who may come to school in need of more practice with fundamental behaviors that aid in academic performance. The necessity for teachers to recognize these needs among a diverse population of students cannot be underestimated. Action research in this vein advances our understanding of this critical instructional practice and how it can be successfully fostered in a supportive PDS partnership.

Of the three teacher-led action research studies reported by the Benson-O'Connor team, one in particular drove home the critical nature of teaching for equity. This project was grounded in the Modern Expectancy-Value model that suggests students' achievement and motivation are tightly coupled with their beliefs about the value of the assigned task and their perceived expectations for success. Students in first and sixth grades were polled regarding their socially constructed concepts of what a scientist looks like and does in that line of work, and regrettably, 60 years beyond the initial study on this concept produced little progress in the diversification of students' perceptions of this profession. This study, however, revealed that equity conscious instruction has the potential to reorient students' concepts toward progressive perceptions regarding the age, gender and race of a scientist. Considering Clark and Clark's (1939; 1950) research on colorism and racial preference, this study recognized the development of and external influences shaping personal consciousness toward an exclusive or inclusive nature. This PDS team noted the ability of action research to acknowledge theory, process data born from practice, and shape policy through dissemination and modeling to increase teaching and learning for equity.

Another featured PDS team led by Burns embraced the challenge of engaging in action research at an urban, high-poverty, low-performing school serving a high population of migrant and undocumented families. While the site was labeled as a turnaround school and positioned for institutional conservatorship, teacher leaders recognized the power of perception and worked to improve academic achievement through student leadership and engagement. The theory upon which this study was built implies that other urban schools labeled as failing and facing a takeover from an external entity might consider the impact of collaborative inquiry of this nature. The action research conducted at this site demonstrated the potential of cyclical inquiry to understand complex problems centered on equity issues that can be addressed through the PDS model.

Practice Architecture in Professional Development Schools

An additional contribution from the Burns PDS team was their recognition of the PDS model to create a hybrid third space. This third space or redirection of the binary created via PDS action research is a form of practice architecture. The prioritization of practice in the theory-practice-policy cycle is aptly described within the notion of practice architecture as a place where educational practice is deconstructed to understand its essence, its implicating factors, and its relationship to other formalized practices (Edwards-Groves, 2018; Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2017; Mahon, Francisco, Kemmis, & Lloyd, 2017; Phelan & Griffiths, 2019). Ultimately, practice architecture and processes like action research that emphasize the hybridity theory maximize the cooperation of the two binaries - schools where practice lives and universities where theory lives - and utilize their combined power to affect policy, the third space where schools and universities are not typically as active. The PDS model standardizes this relationship while validating and strengthening the knowledge production of school-university partnerships.

Another major contribution of this themed issue is its examination of how action research further informs our understanding of the cyclical nature of theory, practice, and policy and speaks to the broader community through education. Action research continues to offer opportunities to model the building of infrastructure, as noted in the Roselle partnership work, which recommended sanctioning the role of teacher leader as a professional function under the expectation that teacher practice and educational pedagogy would routinely be evaluated among a community of experts of practice (school faculty) who are collaborating with experts of theory (university faculty). The effectiveness of this action research project, as well as others included in this issue, endorses the institutionalization of the PDS model as policy among education organizations.

The power of PDS models to drive policy is further seen in the action research from D'Amico and colleagues. This study's focus on developing effective pre-service, induction, and initial experiences for teachers addressed the eminent struggle in education to attract and retain strong teachers, especially in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) content areas. This study reiterated, along with others in this themed issue, the importance of teacher professionalization through conference attendance, continuing education, and structured opportunities to collaborate actively with university faculty in meaningful ways that influence teachers to remain in the classroom. This study also noted that simply keeping teachers in the classroom minimally addresses the ultimate goal of PDS partnerships by emphasizing the critical perceptions of administrators who acknowledged the increased effectiveness of early career teachers who had invested in PDS work compared to those who had not.

And last, the residual impact of PDS relationships on the professional preparation and career trajectories of early career teachers and the renewed investment and sense of service to the profession by veteran teachers is echoed by the Nettleton collaborative. The idea that PDS-supported early career teachers exhibit traits of enhanced instructional ability is reinforced by established research citing positive outcomes for participants (Castle, Fox, & Souder, 2006; Dodman, Groth, Ra, Baker, & Ramezan, 2017; Fisher-Ari, Martin, Burgess, Cox, & Ejike, 2018). This project acknowledged the realistic expectations of action research, with a reminder that the act of performing research often leads to surprise discoveries and teaches unexpected lessons. The action research conducted within each of these PDS partnerships is not only geared toward outcomes, but also toward processes that generate continued curiosity among school and university faculty and fuel the cycle to think more deeply, learn more broadly, and do more collaboratively.

Keeping the Cycle Alive through Action Research

The greater implications of this work extend well beyond PDS settings, and that is why PDS partnerships and the knowledge created at these sites is so vital to the growth, development, and realization of the NAPDS Nine Essentials, and especially NAPDS Essential 1. Action research propels the theory, practice, and policy cycle, and encapsulates some of the most meaningful work conducted around what teachers do in classrooms. Explorations of the relationship between theory and practice or practice and policy often prioritize the theoretical frameworks born from practice as well as the strategic policies that govern practice but rarely focus explicitly on practice as the cyclical driver (Lynch, Rowlands, Gale, & Skourdombis, 2017). Action research disrupts this misconceived dyad and recognizes the critical nature of locating practice as the fundamental component of education knowledge and innovation (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Greene, 2009). As a result, the everyday actions of teacher practice become responsible for the reproductive structures that constitute curriculum and instruction. Thus, action research rightfully captures the evolution of excellence in practice and frames the crafting of standards across theoretical knowledge and policy documentation.

Conclusion

In the opening article of this themed issue, Hunzicker states, “Action research is important.” Indeed, action research is a perfect vehicle for innovation through intentional inquiry and professional development (Efron, & Ravid, 2019; Mertler, 2019). Exemplified in this themed issue – and within the greater PDS network – are educators who lead the nation in partnership-oriented educational renewal through their commitment to equity and to impacting the broader community through education. Yet according to NAPDS Essential 1, action research begs for more explorations of teacher practice, more clarification of school policy, and more refinement of educational theory. In PDS and beyond, educators must keep doing action research until higher levels of teacher satisfaction, positive student outcomes, and ultimately civic engagement based on socially just understandings of our world are realized.

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