Practitioner Inquiry and PDS Work:
A Reflection on 25 Years of Purpose, Problems and Potential

Nancy Fichtman Dana
University of Florida

Abstract: This article reflects on the purpose, problems and potential inquiry offers to the PDS community through the discussion of three tensions experienced by those who inquire within a PDS partnership: (1) University Research versus Practitioner Research; (2) Inquiry as Project versus Inquiry as Stance; and (3) Inquiry as Real versus Inquiry as Ideal. After describing each tension, the author concludes that it is when navigating these tensions, rather than resolving them, that learning and growth happens for all members of the PDS community.

KEYWORDS: professional development schools, PDS, practitioner inquiry, partnerships, tensions, school-university partnerships

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;
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings;

Introduction

The more things change, the more they remain the same.

-French Proverb

When I stepped into my first position in higher education a quarter-century ago in 1992, the importance of building strong school-university partnerships to engage in Professional Development School (PDS) work was receiving heightened attention across the nation. At the time, the Holmes Group (1990) had made a call for the creation of professional development schools, with one guiding principle being that they must include a commitment to making reflection and inquiry a central part of the work. Having engaged in collaborative inquiry with a team of elementary school teachers and their principal for my own dissertation work (see Dana, 1991), as well as supervised student teachers in that same building, I knew that the PDS work being called for and practitioner inquiry were a match made in heaven. As a new assistant professor, I worked over a five-year period to build relationships between town and gown (The State College Area School District and the Pennsylvania State University) where I was employed at the time, and during the 1998-1999 school year, launched a pilot professional development school program, that included engagement in inquiry as its signature feature (see Dana & Silva, 2002; Dana & Silva, 2004; Dana, Silva & Snow-Gerono, 2002; Dana,

Smith & Yendol-Hoppey, 2011; Dana, Yendol-Hoppey & Snow-Gerono, 2006; Silva & Dana, 2004; Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2008). I have been studying, coaching, doing, and teaching about the process of inquiry ever since. On the 25-year anniversary of my first experience intertwining inquiry within the professional development school, in this article, I offer my reflections on the purpose, problems and potential inquiry offers to the PDS community through the discussion of three tensions I have been navigating and continue to navigate as I have engaged in this work over time: (1) University Research versus Practitioner Research; (2) Inquiry as Project versus Inquiry as Stance; and (3) Inquiry as Real versus Inquiry as Ideal.

University Research Versus Practitioner Inquiry

Purpose

Included in the NAPDS statement on what it means to be a professional development school is the following required essential: *Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberative investigations of practice by respective participants*. While university-based teacher educators enter PDS work with training and experience as educational researchers who use quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to study educational practice, this approach to "deliberative investigation of practice" does not make sense for the teachers and administrators within a PDS. Practitioners in the PDS need a research methodology that matches the goals and purposes of their work to engage in deliberative investigation. Practitioner inquiry, defined as systematic, intentional study by educators of their own practice emerges as an important mechanism to generate knowledge from practice within the PDS, complementing the kinds of research produced at a university (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The cyclical process of inquiry begins with educators defining a wondering (a burning question) they have about practice that emerges from a real-world problem, or dilemma, and is followed by collecting data to glean insights into that wondering, analyzing data, synthesizing and sharing with other practitioners what was learned, and taking action for change and improvement (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). In contrast to a university researcher's investigations aiming to have broad impact through journal publication, a practitioner inquirer's investigations aim for local impact on one's own classroom and/or school to improve life and learning conditions for the children and the adults within them.

Problem

Throughout the years I have spent studying, coaching, doing, and teaching about the process of inquiry, I have found that too often, inquiry is interpreted as teachers, principals, and teacher candidates becoming "Mini-Me" versions of university researchers, engaging in an experiment to "prove" a particular teaching strategy is of worth. If the investigations PDS teachers, principals, and teacher candidates are conducting in classrooms mirror exactly the type of process-product quantitative research produced at a university by professors in a miniature form, we are not doing any service to teachers or to schools. Practitioner inquiry is not about a controlled setting, an experiment with a control and treatment groups, crunching numbers, sample sizes, populations, generalizability, or an objective scientist removed from the subjects of study so as not to contaminate the findings.

Rather, practitioner inquiry is a natural extension of good teaching: observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting one's teaching accordingly. The investigations practitioners do are not about proving, but *im*proving practice. The problem is that in the university setting, this kind of research can be easily misunderstood or dismissed.

Potential

As a PDS community, we are uniquely positioned to educate others about the value of practitioner inquiry as a complement to university-based research. To aid in this process, I often invoke the words of Lawrence Stenhouse, who noted that the difference between a teacher-researcher and the large-scale education researcher is like the difference between a farmer with a huge agricultural business to maintain and the "careful gardener" tending a backyard plot:

> In agriculture, the equation of invested input against gross yield is all: it does not matter if individual plants fail to thrive or die so long as the cost of saving them is greater than the cost of losing them . . .This does not apply to the careful gardener whose labor is not costed, but a labor of love. He wants each of his plants to thrive, and he can treat each one individually. Indeed, he can grow a hundred different plants in his garden and differentiate his treatment of each, pruning his roses, but not his sweet peas. Gardening rather than agriculture is the analogy for education. (Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985, p. 26)

This view of the practitioner inquirer as a "careful gardener" is a much more productive image to hold in our minds of PDS teachers, principals and teacher candidates engaging in deliberative investigations of practice. They are not scientists in white lab coats, staring down at their "research subjects" (the students they teach), but "human beings in the midst of teaching, carefully weighing the value of different ways of teaching and learning" (Hubbard & Powers, 1993, pp. 3-4). As a PDS community, we need to continually highlight this difference for others, so that teacher inquiry does not take the form of miniature university research, but rather, serves as a meaningful and productive way to continually learn and grow in one's teaching practice throughout the professional lifetime.

Inquiry as Project Versus Inquiry as Stance

Purpose

As one learns to teach and inquire into teaching within the PDS, a structure must scaffold investigations of practice. Teacher candidates, practicing teachers, and PDS principals are taught the discrete components of the inquiry process defined as follows:

- **Wondering** – a question focused on a problem of practice that emerges from a felt difficulty or real-world dilemma experienced by the practitioner;
- **Data Collection** – capturing the action, learning and thinking that is occurring in the classroom and/or school through such mechanisms as observation, the collection of student work, interview/focus groups, digital pictures, video, reflective journals, weblogs, surveys, and various quantitative measures of student achievement;

- **Data Analysis –** creating a story of one's learning as an inquirer based on a systematic examination of data, and carefully supporting claims made about one's learning with evidences from those data;
- **Sharing –** educators collaborating with one another to define and refine their investigations into practice as well as communicate the results of their work with other professionals; and
- **Action –** making informed change and adjustments to teaching and administrative practice to improve learning conditions within a classroom, a school, and/or an entire district (Dana, 2013).

Cycling through each component of the process, as defined above, throughout one's professional lifetime serves to make investigations of practice deliberative and enables educators to take an inquiry stance towards teaching. The term "inquiry as stance" was first coined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle in the late 1990s when they wrote:

> In everyday language, "stance" is used to describe body postures, particularly with regard to the position of the feet, as in sports or dance, and also to describe political positions, particularly their consistency (or lack thereof) over time. . . In our work, we offer the term inquiry as stance to describe the positions teachers and others who work together in inquiry communities take toward knowledge and its relationships to practice. We use the metaphor of stance to suggest both orientational and positional ideas, to carry allusions to the physical placing of the body as well as to intellectual activities and perspectives over time. In this sense, the metaphor is intended to capture the ways we stand, the ways we see, and the lenses we see through. Teaching is a complex activity that occurs within webs of social, historical, cultural, and political significance. Across the life span, an inquiry stance provides a kind of grounding within the changing cultures of school reform and competing political agendas (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, pp. 288-289).

Since then, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) have authored an entire book entitled *Inquiry as Stance*, carefully choosing these words for their title to suggest that inquiry is more than the sum of its parts (developing questions, collecting and analyzing data, making one's study public, and taking actions for change based on what was learned through the process). Rather, inquiry is "a worldview and a habit of mind — a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one's professional career and that links individuals to larger groups, and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. vii). This is the essence of inquiry as stance: the cultivation of which is the ultimate goal for participants in the Professional Development School.

Problem

Throughout the years I have spent studying, coaching, doing, and teaching about the process of inquiry, I have found that the structure of inquiry (wondering development, data collection, data analysis, sharing, action) often translates into assignments on course syllabi. While it makes perfect sense to use a college course structure to introduce teacher candidates and practicing educators to the process of inquiry, the problem is that when introduced to the process as a coursework assignment, teacher candidates and school practitioners might initially view inquiry as "one more busy work

assignment those professors at the university are going to force me to do." Inquiry becomes a "big project" that exists not as a part of their teaching, but apart from it. Fortunately, I have seen this sentiment subside once one "lives through" an entire cycle of the process and shares the results of their inquiry with others. The act of making public one's work as a teacher inquirer is an authentic experience where educators discover, through seeing the interest and passion for their research in the eyes of those they present their work to, the capability inquiry has to empower teachers as professionals, and put all teachers in the driver's seat of their own professional learning (Dana, 2015).

Potential

As a PDS community, we are uniquely positioned to work towards the creation of more authentic experiences for engagement in inquiry for new and practicing teachers. As the respective participants in the PDS work to simultaneously renew university and K-12 schooling practice, we need to be sure that we are utilizing university traditions of coursework, assignments, presentations, papers, theses, and grades, to help shape the teacher inquiry experience in productive and credible ways for the real world of the classroom, rather than let university traditions of coursework, assignments, presentations, papers, theses, and grades define the teacher inquiry experience. In this way, the view teacher candidates, teachers, and principals initially formulate about inquiry as project, transforms, over time, to inquiry as stance. In addition, as the respective participants in the PDS work to collaboratively design and refine the clinically-based teacher education program, we can experiment with embedding multiple cycles of inquiry throughout the initial teacher preparation experience (Delane et al., in press). Through engaging teacher candidates in multiple cycles of inquiry over time, rather than one cycle as a culminating experience to a teacher education program, we are more likely to cultivate an inquiry stance in the next generation of the teaching workforce. PDSs can lead the way.

Inquiry as Real Versus Inquiry as Ideal

Purpose

As the next generation of teachers adopt an inquiry stance towards teaching, they become a living example and inspiration for others in the teaching profession that inquiry is less about what one does (a project for a university course) and more about who one is (a teacher who positions him/herself professionally—not as an implementer of a rigid, unchanging teaching routine year after year, but a constant and continuous questioner, explorer, and change agent throughout the professional lifetime). Ideally, engagement in teacher inquiry is about transforming the simple, "connect-the-dots" view of teaching so prevalently held by those who set and implement policy that affect the lives of teachers and students in schools, and replacing it with a worldview of teaching that is deeply intellectual, fundamentally ethical, and raises teachers' voices in the discussion of educational reform. As such, teachers' engagement in inquiry should not simply be valued "as a heuristic for the individual teacher," but rather "play a role in the formation of the knowledge base for teaching" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 25).

Problem

Throughout the years I have spent studying, coaching, doing, and teaching about the process of inquiry, I have found that the real world of schools is burdened by policy steeped in a simple "connect-the-dots" view of teaching. Therefore, achieving the ideal of what inquiry can and should mean for an educator is difficult to achieve. To contribute to the knowledge base for teaching, inquiry must "be cumulative and accessible to different people over time for a variety of purposes" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 25). This often does not happen when inquiry is conducted by practitioners because the pressures of policies and mandates seem to necessitate focusing one's investigation into practice on whatever the latest innovation being introduced into a district happens to be; the fast, harried pace of life in schools makes the time it takes to capture the inquiries, completed by teachers, and make them accessible to others a challenge.

Potential

As a PDS community, we are uniquely positioned to encourage cumulative inquiry over time and to make inquiry accessible to different people for different purposes in different places by nature of the long-term school-university partnership relationships forged with one another. We draw strength from our shared history, working together overtime to resist the urge to jump from one innovation to the next, staying the course to work on the most persistent and pervasive problems facing schools, while chipping away at them a little bit at a time. Kincheloe (1991) writes:

> The plethora of small changes made by critical teacher researchers around the world in individual classrooms may bring about far more authentic educational reform than the grandiose policies formulated in state or national capitals. (p. 14)

Authentic educational reform is the heart of PDS work. As we use resources afforded within the PDS to document our reform efforts through such venues as PDS inquiry conferences and this special-themed issue of *School-University Partnerships*, we create the opportunity "for the profession to expand its knowledge base by putting research into practice – and practice into research" (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 1). A PDS culture supports the construction of knowledge and using that knowledge to continually reform, refine, shape, and reshape the practice of teaching toward a more just and equitable schooling experience for all.

Concluding Thoughts

The framing of my reflections as three unresolved tensions I have been experiencing related to inquiry for twenty-five years might give the impression that engaging in inquiry is a hopeless cause for members of the PDS community. After all, after 25 years, if the tensions between university research and practitioner inquiry; inquiry as project and inquiry as stance; and inquiry as real and inquiry as ideal have yet to be resolved, should PDSs continue to embrace inquiry? Might those who work in PDSs better place their time and energy into other endeavors?

When I ponder my experiences with inquiry in a dichotomous fashion, I must admit that it can appear on the surface that not much has changed in 25 years and lead me to wonder if the integration of inquiry into the PDS is worth the effort it takes. It is easy to lament when I see researchers valuing

university research, but not practitioner inquiry. Similarly, teacher candidates experiencing inquiry as a project, but not as a stance. Moreover, educators critiquing the ways inquiry is shaped by the reality of life in schools when it doesn't match the ideal vision for the practitioner research movement.

However, as I conclude this piece, I want to suggest a different way of interpreting the tensions described: rather than viewing these tensions in a dichotomous "either/or" manner with one polarity equating with something "good" and the other something "bad," we can consider them instead in terms of "both/and," and find the value in each. Educators can embrace *both* university research *and* practitioner inquiry, teacher candidates can experience inquiry as *both* project *and* stance, and the inquiry produced by practitioners can be shaped by *both* the real *and* the ideal. For over time, I have learned that it is in navigating the tensions, rather than resolving them, that learning and growth happens for all members of the PDS community. Living the tensions is the real value of inquiry; it is through living in these tensions that we find our purpose, tackle our problems, and actualize our potential. In the end, this is what PDS work is all about—embracing all the inherent tensions that reside in the complex acts of teaching and learning, and in so doing, becoming the very best educators, we can all be … together!

References

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 249-305.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Dana, N.F. (1991). *Four walls with a future: Changing educational practices through collaborative action research.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Florida State University: Tallahassee, FL.

Dana, N. F. (2013). *Digging deeper into action research: A teacher inquirer's field guide.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Dana, N. F. (2015). Understanding inquiry as stance: Illustration and analysis of one teacher researcher's work. *LEARNing Landscapes, 8*(2), 161-172.

Dana, N. F. & Silva, D. Y. (2002). Building an inquiry oriented PDS: Inquiry as a part of mentor teacher work. In I. N. Guadarrama, J. Nath, and J. Ramsey (Eds.) *Forging alliances in community and thought: Research in professional development schools.* Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 87-104.

Dana, N. F., & Silva, D. Y. (2004). What about the children?: Studying the professional development school's impact on students' school experiences. In E.M. Guyton & J. R. Dangel (Eds.) *Research linking teacher preparation and student performance: Teacher education yearbook XII*, Iowa: Kendal/Hunt Publishing Company, 125-150.

Dana, N. F., Silva, D. Y., & Snow-Gerono, J. (2002). Building a culture of inquiry in professional development schools. *Teacher Education and Practice, 15*(4), 71-89.

Dana, N. F., Smith, J., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2011). Teacher research in the PDS: How do we define quality? In J. L. Nath*,* I. N. Guadarrama, and J. Ramsey (Eds.) *Investigating university-school partnerships*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 137-152.

Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2014). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry, 3rd Edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Dana, N. F., Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Snow-Gerono, J. L. (2006). Deconstructing inquiry in the professional development school: Exploring the domains and contents of teachers' questions. *Action in Teacher Education, 27*(4), 59-71.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). *Professional development schools: Schools for developing a profession*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Delane, D. C., Hooser, A., Richner, M., Wolkenhauer, R., Colvin, S. M., & Dana, N. F. (in press). Practitioner inquiry as the anchor of clinical practice throughout the teacher education program. In R. Flessner & D.R. Lecklider (Eds.) *The power of clinical preparation in teacher education.* Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Holmes Group. (1990). *Tomorrow's schools: Principles for the design of professional development schools*. East Lansing, MI: Author.

Hubbard, R.S., & Power, B.M. (1993). *The art of classroom inquiry: A handbook for teacher researchers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kincheloe, J. (1991). *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment.* New York: Falmer.

Ruddock, J., & Hopkins, D. (Eds.). (1985). *Research as a basis for teaching: Readings from the work of Lawrence Stenhouse*. London: Heinemann.

Silva, D. Y., & Dana, N. F. (2004). Encountering new spaces: Teachers developing voice within a professional development school. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(2), 128-140.

Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Dana, N. F. (2008). Inquiry-oriented mentoring in the professional development school: The case of Claudia. In I. N. Guadarrama, J. Nath, and J. Ramsey (Eds.) *Collaboration in leadership and learning: Research in professional development schools, Volume 3*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 251-274.

Nancy Fichtman Dana is Professor of Education at the University of Florida. Her research focuses on professional learning through inquiry. She has published 10 books and over 80 articles on the topic.