

Maryland's Journey in Creating a Culture of Teacher Inquiry Statewide

Maggie Madden
University of Maryland Eastern Shore

Abstract: This article describes the way in which Maryland developed an infrastructure across the state, local school systems and higher education institution levels to create a culture of teacher inquiry in professional development schools (PDS) statewide. With a combination of reform efforts in clinical preparation and teacher inquiry, Maryland established standards and developmental guidelines for PDSs that included a cross-cutting theme of research and inquiry across all standards. Supports were developed and implemented across all stakeholder groups. The Maryland PDS Network played a key role in expanding the reach of teacher inquiry through professional development, conferences and a state requirement that all teacher candidates engage in action research or inquiry. Teacher candidates are well-prepared for recent reform efforts related to teacher evaluation including Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). Maryland representatives have shared actively in conference presentations and writing journal articles and books. This has resulted in a culture of teacher inquiry statewide that is truly a PreK-20 effort.

KEYWORDS: teacher inquiry, professional development schools, PDS Infrastructure, PDS Standards

NAPDS 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;
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the result of deliberative investigations of practice by respective participants;

Introduction

For change to occur and be implemented successfully, all partners in the process must be involved actively. Ideas for change and innovation may be identified by pioneers in the field but, without the full support of stakeholders and their involvement in implementation, true change does not become institutionalized. The successful embedding of teacher inquiry in educator preparation programs in Maryland relied on support from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). The following is the story of how Maryland PreK-20 stakeholders worked together to develop, implement, support, and sustain teacher inquiry for preservice and in-service teachers statewide.

In the 1990s, pioneers in the field of action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Miller, 2001) brought the concept and practice of teacher research to the attention of the PreK-20 educational community as a way for preservice and in-service teachers to improve their instruction to increase student achievement. Other early pioneers included the National Writing Project, which provided funding to the Maryland Writing Project for Research Institutes, where PreK-20 faculty came together across local school systems and higher education

institutions to learn about and implement action research projects. The teacher research process is embedded in the work of the classroom teacher in examining practice, collecting data, reflecting, and making changes for continuous improvement. Reflection has been a key component of educator preparation. Such reflection provides candidates with a greater understanding of how their teaching actions can be improved daily to meet the needs of their students (Hendricks, 2016; Mills, 2014; Sullivan, Glenn, Roche, & McDonagh, 2016). As terminology for this process has changed across time, the teacher inquiry process provides a structure within which reflection, focused on the needs of students and increased student achievement, can occur. (Razfar, 2011). Concurrent with the increasing use of teacher research, Maryland was in the process of closely examining clinical experiences for teacher candidates, particularly in Professional Development Schools (PDSs). This emphasis on action research and inquiry along with PDS created a perfect storm for Maryland to link the two reform efforts and institutionalize them statewide.

The teacher inquiry and PDS movements began on separate paths. In 1995, Maryland embarked on a major reform effort for teacher preparation programs that resulted in massive changes for state-approved initial preparation programs (Maryland State Department of Education and Maryland Higher Education Commission, 1995). Again, pioneers in the field of clinical practice (Holmes Group, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 1994) brought forward the importance of meaningful experiences for teacher candidates in PreK-12 schools. Maryland's reform initiative included the requirement that all initial preparation candidates be prepared in a specially designed PDS. As with all new initiatives, funding is essential for establishing an infrastructure and requirements. In the case of PDS, small state grants and a significant federal grant provided needed funds to develop standards and indicators for PDS. Based on the work of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards (NCATE, 2001b), and with the assistance of Dr. Lee Teitel who worked with PDS at University of Massachusetts and NCATE (Teitel, 2003), Maryland took the NCATE PDS standards and specified them to reflect state reform initiatives.

Combining representatives from the PreK-20 community in workshops, summer institutes and final pilot testing and revision, Maryland identified five standards for PDS: Learning Community, Collaboration, Accountability, Organization, Roles and Resources, and Diversity and Equity. In addition, the PDS community identified four cross-cutting themes: Teacher Preparation, Continuing Professional Development, Research and Inquiry, and Student Achievement. Thus, teacher inquiry was required to be embedded across all standards and indicators. These standards and indicators serve as a guide for the implementation of teacher inquiry in PDS and as a measure used in state program approval to determine the developmental level of a PDS. By including Research and Inquiry as a critical component for each of the standards, Maryland showed its commitment to the concept and implementation of teacher inquiry.

Establishing the Culture

To produce systematic statewide change, Maryland engaged in the development of a manual to guide the implementation of PDS (Maryland Partnership for Teaching and Learning K-16, 2003), as well as a framework for assessment to be used in state program approval (Maryland State Department of Education, 2007). These documents provided an infrastructure that allowed for development of common understandings about teacher inquiry across local school systems and higher education institutions. Since Research and Inquiry became a requirement for all candidates in Maryland teacher preparation programs, it was essential to develop and implement supports to

guide the process. To ensure the successful infusion of teacher research and inquiry into preparation programs, supports were provided at various levels: state, local school systems, and higher education institutions. Implementation of these initiatives occurred concurrently and representatives from each stakeholder group participated. Since Maryland has a tradition of collaborating across higher education, local school systems and schools, leaders in action research and teacher inquiry willingly shared their expertise with others. Necessary inquiry training for interns, school faculty, and higher education faculty fostered this collaboration. All initial preparation programs in Maryland were involved in this work.

At the state level, state representatives worked closely with both local school systems and higher education institutions to encourage and support their work. Regional meetings sponsored by MSDE provided an opportunity for PreK-20 practitioners to share best practices related to specific topics such as action research and inquiry. One mechanism for bringing the community together around teacher inquiry is an annual state conference supported by the Maryland PDS Network, which has had a focus on teacher inquiry since its inception. The conference is hosted at various institutions, and planned and implemented by representatives of local school systems and higher education. Keynote speakers have included nationally recognized experts in action research, whose work was shared with conference attendees (Sagor, 2005). These collaboratively planned and attended conferences have become a venue for sharing teacher inquiry, particularly by interns.

The annual PDS Network Conference promotes the culture of teacher inquiry because it serves as a vehicle for sharing the research and inquiry projects that occur in classrooms and schools. The conference demonstrates that Maryland provides a venue for sharing research and inquiry projects because such efforts produce valuable insights into interns' classroom practices. This annual conference attracts over 200 attendees each year. Beginning with a focus on sharing findings of research and inquiry from PreK-20 faculty and administrators, the conference has grown to include an opportunity for interns from preparation programs across the Maryland area to present their action research, inquiry or student impact studies in an Intern Gallery Walk, a highlight of the conference. Some higher education institutions require their candidates to advance their individual inquiry activities toward a process of sharing knowledge and insights with other stakeholders. Some interns also present their work at national conferences (e.g. National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) conference).

Maryland has cultivated a community of learners and leaders in teacher inquiry. With the growth of teacher inquiry in Maryland, expertise has been demonstrated in local and national conference presentations and written journal articles and books (Garin, 2014; Garin, Taylor, Madden, Beiter, Davis, Farmer, & Nowling, 2015; Jack & Rorke, 2014; Levy & Siers, 2014; Pelton, 2010; Pelton, 2010) focused on the action research process. PreK-20 representatives from Maryland have provided significant support and leadership for NAPDS leadership and publications. Many Maryland faculty and administrators were significantly involved in the development of NAPDS as founding members and contributed to the development of the Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2008). Three Maryland representatives, of both local school systems and higher education institutions, have served as President of NAPDS, with others serving in other leadership and board positions. Maryland representatives are major supporters and implementers of the NAPDS publications, taking what they have accomplished and sharing that expertise with others.

In addition to involvement with NAPDS, Maryland representatives have served in leadership capacities provided by the American Educational Research Association (AERA)

including special interest groups related to both PDS and teacher inquiry. This national and international involvement has provided multiple opportunities to learn from the work of others, thus enriching an understanding of both PDS and the importance of teacher inquiry in PDS implementation.

At the higher education level, with all teacher candidates required to engage in action research or inquiry, institutions needed to examine their curriculum to determine where action research or inquiry would be placed in a candidate's experience. This involved training for both faculty and candidates in the action research process. What began as a major effort to familiarize participants is now a commonplace expectation. In addition to requiring candidates to complete action research or inquiry projects, higher education institutions provide opportunities for candidates to share their results at the department, school, and local school system level. Higher education institutions are able to foster collaboration with their PreK-12 partners by involving them as assessors of the action research or inquiry projects.

At the local school system level, school faculty and administrators realized the importance of action research for their in-service teachers. Local school systems recognized the importance of action research in its early stages, some hiring full-time specialists who provided professional development and support for faculty. When action research became a requirement for interns, this required training in the action research process for mentors. At times, interns were more aware of action research than their mentor teachers. Some mentors required persuading before allowing interns to conduct action research in their classrooms. Significant issues surrounding the concept of "research" needed to be clarified to orient in-service teachers to the idea of implementation. Upon clarification, mentors understood that the steps in action research were the steps they used, each day, to identify a question about their practice, make modifications, examine results, and determine ways to move forward. In these efforts, Maryland PreK-20 practitioners provided the training within and among their own institutions and local school systems.

Some local school systems have Intern Gallery Walks that include representatives from a number of higher education institutions. Gallery Walks include action research, teacher inquiring, and student impact studies. Recent events have included the participation of hiring representatives who could offer contracts during the Gallery Walk.

Evolving Implementation

With increasing emphasis on the evaluation of teachers using performance-based measures, Maryland adopted the use of Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) as a significant piece of the statewide teacher evaluation system. Using the action research process as a guide, the employment of SLOs provides validation for early implementers of an inquiry stance, underscoring the importance of data collected by teachers in their own classrooms. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). While this change was disconcerting for many teachers, teacher candidates and interns were well prepared to engage in the SLO process, as it mirrors the action research process. Local school systems and higher education institutions are working together to ensure their interns are prepared for the teacher evaluation process they will encounter once employed. Teacher Inquiry continues to evolve in professional development and the increasing importance of reflection based on data.

Conclusion

Why is the PDS model so appropriate for teacher inquiry? PDS, at its core, is about the community of learners, increasing competency and sharing across traditional boundaries of higher education institutions and PreK-12 schools. In PDS, this distinction is one that values the work of both entities, learning with and from each other. Teacher inquiry spans all of the Maryland PDS standards.

Teacher inquiry is a thread that runs through all Maryland PDS Standards. Teacher inquiry is both an individual and community endeavor, represented within a *Learning Community*. Preservice and inservice teachers engage in teacher inquiry in their classrooms in order to examine and improve their practice. While this is helpful to them, teacher inquiry should also be a community activity where groups of interns, faculty, and administrators share the results of their individual work. This *Collaboration* enriches the inquiry process. Maryland's infrastructure provides guidelines for *Accountability* for interns and PreK-20 practitioners by requiring all interns to complete inquiry projects. Maryland has created guidelines for *Organization, Roles and Resources* to ensure that all who are involved recognize their part in the teacher inquiry process, including sharing results with other practitioners. At the center of teacher inquiry are the students who represent a diverse population whose needs can be identified and addressed in relation to the *Diversity and Equity* standard.

The most significant result of this purposeful focus on teacher inquiry has been the development of a culture of inquiry across Maryland, where stakeholders are speaking the same language and are deeply involved in the reflective process. The development of this culture of inquiry was made possible not only by the collaborative work of the PreK-20 stakeholders, including interns, but also by putting in place an infrastructure that supported this cross-boundary culture of inquiry.

This process can be replicated within and among the school, school system, and higher education levels. Essential to creating this inquiry stance is advanced planning about what infrastructure is required to foster a culture of inquiry. Making teacher inquiry a requirement for interns expands to mentors and higher education faculty who become part of the process. School and higher education faculty leaders in teacher inquiry should be identified and trained to begin the process. If teacher inquiry is a new concept, there should be enthusiasm about how engaging in this process is personally and professionally beneficial. Providing clear expectations for interns, mentors, and university supervisors eliminates frustration that can occur. Building in time for reflection and sharing is essential to make engaging in teacher inquiry a meaningful experience that will continue past the requirement stage.

The teacher inquiry process is a process through which interns, mentors, and higher education supervisors collaborate in making connections to everyday practice in schools in a meaningful way. As always, celebrating accomplishments and establishing ways in which the conversation can continue so an inquiry project is not just a one-time experience, but the beginning of the development of a culture of practice.

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Maggie Madden is the Hazel Professor in the Department of Education, University of Maryland Eastern Shore. Previously, she was Maryland PDS Network Coordinator at Maryland State Department of Education.