The Impact of Teacher Leadership on Student Learning in Professional Development Schools (PDS): Action Research is Important

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Abstract: Action research improves teaching practice, builds teacher leadership skills, and supports student learning. Moreover, professional development schools (PDS) and other school-university collaborations are positioned to provide built-in guidance and support for P-12 teacher-researchers. This article provides an overview of 12 action research projects that comprise the special issue of *School-University Partnerships* themed "The Impact of Teacher Leadership on Student Learning in Professional Development Schools." The themed issue provides action research models and inspiration for teacher-researchers, a starting point for teacher leaders and college/university faculty, and impetus for writing up action research for scholarly presentation and publication.

KEYWORDS: *action research, teacher-researcher, teacher leadership, professional development schools (PDS), student learning*

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings

　　For the past 40 years, teacher leadership has been conceptualized as teachers working together to positively influence teaching and learning for the benefit of students (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lotter, Yow, Lee, Zeis, & Irvin, 2020; Nelson, 1980; Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). Even so, in 2004 York-Barr and Duke reported that very few empirical studies of teacher leadership conducted between 1980 and 2004 robustly supported the positive effects of teacher leadership on student learning. Twelve years later, Wenner and Campbell (2016) reported that between 2004 and 2013 no research on teacher leadership examined the impact of teacher leaders on student learning. Much is known about the positive influence of teacher leadership on teachers, but research is desperately needed to document the impact of teacher leadership on students (Sugg, 2013; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). Professional development schools offer a great place to begin.

Teacher Leadership, Student Learning, and Professional Development Schools

　　By definition, professional development schools (PDS) are school-university partnerships that support four core practices: teacher preparation, professional development, inquiry and

research, and student learning (Holmes Group, 1986, 1990). Similar to the need for teacher leadership research, PDS advocates are calling for more outcomes-based research focused on the core practice of student learning (Ferrara, 2014; Field, 2014; Neapolitan & Levine, 2011). The ASCD Whole Child Initiative defines *student learning* as "achievement and accountability that promotes the development of children who are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged" (Varlas, 2008, Defining Full-Service Community Schools, para. 2). Because professional development schools "prioritize teacher learning and leadership, model innovation and best instructional practices, and support the pursuit and dissemination of educational research and other scholarly work" (Hunzicker, 2018, p. 33), they provide comprehensive research settings for both the study of teacher leadership and the study of student learning.

In professional development schools, *teacher leadership* is defined as "a strategic, process-oriented stance motivated by deep concern for students and activated through formal, informal, and hybrid leadership roles that span the boundaries of school, university, and community" (Hunzicker, 2018, p. 24). Because professional development schools encourage "dense and inclusive distributed-leadership practice," they are likely to house a higher percentage of teacher leaders, which in turn increases the likelihood of positive impact on student learning (Fulmer & Basile, 2006, p. 144). One way teachers in professional development schools exercise teacher leadership is through action research.

Action Research and Professional Development Schools

Action research "focuses on the concerns of teachers, rather than outside researchers, and provides a vehicle that teachers can use to untangle the complexities of their daily work" (Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 304). The primary purpose of action research is for teachers themselves to gather meaningful data that they can use immediately to inform their teaching practice for the benefit of students. Developed for use in P-12 (pre-school through high school) classrooms, action research is based on three assumptions: (a) educators work best on problems they identify for themselves; (b) educators become more effective when they examine, assess, and modify their own teaching practice; and (c) educators help one another through collaboration and sharing (Borg, 1992; Watts, 1985).

Classroom teachers are well-positioned to conduct student-focused action research because they know their students well and care about their students' academic success and social-emotional well-being (Badiali, 2018; Garin, 2016). For example, one PDS teacher's classroom-level effort to de-track ninth grade algebra courses eventually resulted in school-wide and later district-wide implementation (Jeffries, 2018). Moreover, when classroom teachers engage in collaborative professional activities such as action research, they develop leadership skills and often emerge as leaders (Hunzicker, 2012: Lotter et al., 2020). Specifically, teacher engagement in research encourages teachers to lead with literature, from data, through sharing, and by example (Wolkenhauer, Hill, Dana, & Stukey, 2017).

Various action research models exist. The process typically involves six steps: 1) identifying the problem and articulating research questions; 2) gathering data; 3) interpreting the data; 4) acting on the evidence; 5) evaluating the outcome(s) of changes made; and 6) identifying new questions (Ferrance, 2000). In professional development schools, the core practices of teacher preparation, professional development, inquiry and research, and student learning can be realized

through action research projects. For example, in one professional development school, pre-service teachers conducted classroom-level action research projects to strengthen their teaching practice and increase student learning (Shanks, Miller, & Rosendale, 2012). The opportunity to integrate the four PDS core practices into the action research process further distinguishes professional development schools as ideal settings for studying the impact of teacher leadership on student learning.

Action Research, Teacher Leadership, and this Themed Issue

In addition to conducting action research to grow professionally and to improve or enhance student learning, teachers conduct action research to advance the teaching profession (Garin, 2016; Johnson, 1995). But for action research to have the greatest impact, it must be shared with others (Field, 2018). Indeed, action research becomes an act of teacher leadership when the research process is led by teachers and/or when the research findings are presented or published so that others may benefit (Smeets & Ponte, 2009; Wolkenhauer et al., 2017).

This themed issue of *School-University Partnerships* encourages teachers in professional development schools and other school-university partnerships to demonstrate teacher leadership by conducting action research projects designed to improve the quality of P-12 student learning experiences and/or increase P-12 student achievement and share the findings with others in the form of a scholarly article.

Overview of Action Research Projects

In keeping with the four core practices of PDS (Holmes Group, 1986, 1990), this themed issue is organized into four sections. Section I highlights teacher preparation. In the article "Converse, Diverse, Immerse: A Comparative Analysis of Teacher Candidates doing Action Research in Professional Development Schools (PDS)," Nettleton and colleagues compare the professional skill development of undergraduate teacher candidates who did and did not participate in action research as part of their PDS teacher preparation programs. In "STEM Teaching and Teacher Retention in High-Need School Districts," D'Amico and colleagues report on an action research case study that identifies components within a teacher preparation program that promote effective mathematics and science instruction in the initial years of teaching. And in "Examining Action Research and Teacher Inquiry Projects: How do they Help Future and Current Teachers?," Polly and colleagues describe the action research and teacher inquiry projects of five teacher candidates and two in-service teachers before discussing how the research process contributes to the development of both teachers and teacher leaders.

Section II focuses on professional improvement, with emphasis on using action research for professional self-study. In the article "Using Content Analysis, Critical Friends, and a Reflective Journal to Impact Districtwide Teacher Learning in Literacy Instruction: An Action Research Self-Study," Shivers and colleagues share an action research project undertaken to determine the coherency of one district leader's messaging during a series of keynote presentations focused on effective literacy instruction. In "Our Continuing Instructional Coaching Journey: An Action Research Project," Emery and colleagues recount how they collaborated on a survey-based self-study to examine their impact as first-year instructional coaches. And in "The Influence of

Teacher Leadership on Elementary Students in an Urban Professional Development School (PDS)," Burns and colleagues report on a longitudinal collaborative inquiry designed to understand how teacher leaders in one PDS positively influenced student opportunities, perceptions, and leadership school-wide.

Section III features teacher leadership roles and student learning. In the article "Professional Development School (PDS) Building Liaisons: Going beyond Student Learning Outcomes," Rutter and colleagues explore ways that PDS building liaisons helped to shape the learning of pre-service teachers and K-5 students. In "Fostering Beginning Teacher Growth through Action Research," Harris and colleagues describe how faculty-in-residence collaborated with in-service teachers at three different PDS sites to conduct action research for the benefit of students. And in "Daring Greatly: School-University Partnerships and the Development of Teacher Leadership," Roselle and colleagues analyze how teachers' commitment to a formalized lead teacher role impacted their self-perceptions as leaders and agents of change, which in turn impacted P-12 student learning.

Section IV showcases classroom-based student learning. In the article "Analyzing Students' Self-Confidence and Participation in Class Discussions," Mallon and colleagues describe how they carried out PDS-supported action research to increase the self-confidence and participation of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) during class discussions. In "Investigating Student Motivation to Read: Community, Environment, and Reluctant Readers," Meritt and Spreer collaboratively investigate why capable fourth grade readers were unmotivated to read self-selected materials for enjoyment during independent reading time. And in "Action Research in STEM: Teacher-Led Projects from Primary to Middle School," Benson-O'Connor and colleagues share summaries of three teacher-led action research projects conducted in partnership with one university's Center for STEM Education to support student learning in individual classrooms and grade-wide.

In each of these studies, P-12 teachers (and sometimes administrators) collaborated with college/university faculty to design and conduct action research that was timely and meaningful. The studies were timely because they addressed research problems or questions that teachers were facing in the moment. The studies were meaningful because the information gathered allowed teachers to better understand the problem or question under investigation and – most important – to take informed action in addressing their problem or applying what they learned.

Why is Action Research Important?

So why is action research important? First, engaging in action research improves teaching practice. Teachers who conduct classroom-based research generally report more effective teaching, more frequent collaboration with colleagues, and improved professional relationships (Boles & Troen, 1994; Gordon & Solis, 2018). Moreover, when teacher leaders conduct action research under the guidance of college or university faculty, they tend to report greater motivation for ongoing professional learning as well as plans for continuous improvement moving forward (Amador, Wallin, & Keehr, 2019).

Second, engaging in action research builds teacher leadership skills. Teachers' engagement in collaborative action research leads to self-confidence and feelings of empowerment (Ryan, Taylor, Barone, Della Pesca, Durgana, Ostrowski, Piccirillo, & Pikaard, 2016) as well as greater

intentionality in decision-making (Amador et al., 2019). Indeed, leading teacher leadership frameworks identify conducting, facilitating, and sharing action research and other forms of inquiry as key indicators of teacher leadership. The Teacher Leader Model Standards' Domain II: Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice implores teacher leaders to assist, facilitate, support, and teach colleagues to engage in research designed to improve teaching and learning (Teacher Leader Exploratory Consortium, 2011); and the Teacher Leadership Competencies embed reading, conducting, and applying research throughout the four competencies as routine practices of teacher leadership (National Education Association, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, & Center for Teaching Quality, 2018).

Third, engaging in action research supports student learning. Catelli, Carlino, and Petraglia (2017) reported increased student achievement in third grade mathematics and fourth grade writing following a two-year PDS action research project. Moreover, when teachers engage in collaborative action research, school-wide improvements related to preservice teacher education, curriculum development, classroom-based research, and school governance can indirectly benefit students (Boles & Troen, 1994). In fact, Garin (2017) found that teacher-researchers in both PDS and non-PDS settings reported increases in student learning as a result of their action research efforts. Even when the research findings are "unexpected or less than favorable," action research provides important data that teachers and administrators can use to continue striving for improvement (Diana Jr, 2011, p. 172).

Pulling all three points together, action research is important because it strengthens teaching, leadership, and learning in today's schools. Additionally, action research promotes ethical decision making. In their closing article, Jeffries and Nelson link several of the action research projects reported in this themed issue to NAPDS Essential 1 (NAPDS, 2008) 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. They conclude:

> …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 (p. 157).

Simply put, action research is important because it is the professional thing to do. It is also the right thing to do.

The PDS Advantage

The action research projects presented in this themed issue illustrate how professional development schools and other school-university collaborations are positioned to provide built-in guidance and support for P-12 teacher-researchers. Guided by the Nine Essentials of PDS (NAPDS, 2008), school-university action research collaborations tend to encourage teachers' exploration of professional practice and facilitate working together in teams around common goals (Boles & Troen, 1994). PDS collaborations also provide systematic professional development and ongoing support as teachers plan, conduct, apply, and disseminate action research (Amador et al., 2019; Gordon & Solis, 2018). Furthermore, when action research is conducted school-wide under

the guidance of a university partner, teacher-researchers are more likely to benefit from principal support (Garin, 2017; Gordon & Solis, 2018). But most significant of all, conducting action research creates professional fulfillment. Garin (2017) explains:

> PDS teachers experience teacher leadership roles as part of their PDS partnership including participation in their own action research, mentoring their teacher candidates through their action research, as well as participating in inquiry groups with other mentor teachers and teacher candidates. They reported that they remain in the classroom because these PDS opportunities provide the leadership experiences that they seek (p. 24).

Such embedded support, positive outcomes, and opportunities for teacher leadership has been referred to as "the PDS advantage" (Hunzicker, 2019, p. 5).

Concluding Remarks

When P-12 teachers and college/university faculty work together to conduct action research, everyone benefits. The action research projects presented in this themed issue provide models and inspiration for teachers who have considered action research but don't know where to begin. They also offer a starting point for teacher leaders and college/university faculty interested in designing professional development and ongoing supports and structures for action research endeavors, within one classroom, school-wide, and beyond. Additionally, the action research projects presented in this themed issue are meant to generate newfound impetus for writing up action research for scholarly presentation and publication. Even classroom-based action research can benefit others when it is shared widely.

Thank you to my co-editors, Rhonda Baynes Jeffries and Suzanna Nelson, for their vision, commitment, and long hours spent preparing this themed issue of *School-University Partnerships*. Thank you also to the 57 unique authors who contributed their action research experiences and insights in the form of scholarly articles. It is our hope that, after reading the articles that compile this themed issue, our readers will agree: Action research is important.

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