Inquiry-Oriented Mentoring in the Professional Development School: Two Illustrations

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the process of inquiry-oriented mentoring as an appropriate tool for developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of mentors who work with prospective teachers within the professional development school. The process shows promise as a tool for capturing the knowledge of what constitutes powerful mentoring practices, by drawing on the systematic study of mentors engaged in studying their own work. Drawing on the tenants of teacher inquiry, this article offers two illustrations of what inquiry-oriented mentoring looks like, and it discusses how inquiry-oriented mentoring might contribute to deepening the mentoring knowledge base.

The Holmes Group (1990) names inquiry and reflection as central components to achieving the simultaneous renewal sought in viable professional development school (PDS) partnerships. Hence, one critical component for all members of a PDS is engagement in teacher inquiry (Dana & Silva, 2002; Dana, Silva, & Snow-Gerono, 2002). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher inquiry as systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own classroom practice. There exist four main reasons for the longevity of the teacher inquiry concept, as well as its centrality to PDS work: First, the inquiry process has proven to be a powerful tool for teacher professional development (Zeichner, 2003), and one core goal of PDS work is professional development of practicing teachers and administrators. Second, the inquiry process has proven to be a powerful mechanism for prospective teachers to learn about the culture of schools and the characteristics and needs of the children in their classrooms (Fueyo & Neves, 1995), and one core goal of PDS work is prospective-teacher preparation. Third, the inquiry process has become an important vehicle to raise teachers’ voices in educational reform (Meyers & Rust, 2003), and one core goal of PDS work is to raise practitioners’ voices in simultaneous renewal efforts in public school education and university teacher preparation. Fourth, the inquiry process is a mechanism for expanding the knowledge base for teaching in important ways (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), and one core goal of PDS work is to make contributions to the knowledge base for teaching through the power of schools and universities’ partnering in research efforts.

Inquiring professionals conduct research on their classroom practice by posing questions, or wonderings; by collecting data to
gain insights into their wonderings; by analyzing the data, along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). The ultimate goal of engagement in teacher research is to create an inquiry stance toward teaching. To achieve this stance, teachers must first understand the inherent complexity of teaching. An inquiry stance actually becomes a professional positioning owned by the teacher, where questioning one’s practice becomes part of the teacher’s work and, eventually, a part of the teaching culture. By cultivating this inquiry stance toward teaching, teachers play a critical role in enhancing their professional growth and, ultimately, the experience of schooling for children (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008, 2009). According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001),

a legitimate and essential purpose of professional development is the development of an inquiry stance on teaching that is critical and transformative, a stance linked not only to high standards for the learning of all students but also to social change and social justice and to the individual and collective professional growth of teachers. (p. 46)

A great deal of attention has been given to the adaptation and development of an inquiry stance toward teaching and learning in the PDS. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (2001) standards for the PDS state that inquiry is the process through which professional and student learning are integrated. Tunks and Neapolitan (2007) state that inquiry helps to sustain the functions of student learning, professional development, and teacher preparation in PDSs. Less attention has been focused on applying the tenets of an inquiry stance to the process of mentoring, which according to Wang (2001), is “one of the most important strategies to support novices’ learning to teach and, thus, to improve the quality of teaching” (p. 52). What is an inquiry-oriented approach to mentoring? What does it look like and why is it important? Why are PDSs a critical context for inquiry-oriented mentoring to take place? The purpose of this article is to explore these questions and provide illustrations about (1) the ways that inquiry can inform and improve mentoring practice and (2) the central role that PDSs can play to cultivating inquiry-oriented mentoring as a part of one’s mentoring practice.

What Is an Inquiry-Oriented Approach to Mentoring and Why Is It Important?

Numerous mentor teachers in the PDS engage in teacher research, either independently or in collaboration with PDS interns and university supervisors, as a part of their PDS work (Dana & Silva, 2002; Frankes, Valli, & Cooper, 1998; National Center for Restructuring Education Schools and Teaching, 1993; Snow-Gerono, 2005). The focus of this teacher research is to gain insights into one’s own pedagogy or into the particular learners of one’s classroom during any given school year. PDS teachers develop wonderings that emerge from tensions and dilemmas of classroom practice; they collect and analyze data to gain insights into these questions; and they make changes to classroom practice based on the new knowledge that they have constructed through the inquiry process. As such, PDS teachers can utilize the process of inquiry to explore the ways that one transitions from a teacher of children to a teacher educator and mentor in the PDS. According to Wang (2001),

relevant teaching experience, though important, is not a sufficient condition for a teacher to be a professional mentor. Mentors who are practicing or moving toward practicing the reform-minded teaching may not develop the necessary conceptions and practices of mentoring that offer all the crucial opportunities for novices to learn to teach in a similar way. (pp. 71–72)
As Wang suggests, just as teaching is an inherently complex activity, so is mentoring. Because of mentoring's complexity, it is natural and normal for many problems, issues, tensions, and dilemmas to emerge for mentor teachers as they work with novices. An inquiry-oriented approach to mentoring acknowledges this complexity. Inquiry-oriented mentors define wonderings that emerge from their work with novice teachers; they collect and analyze data to help them gain insights into those wonderings; and they continue to learn and grow as mentor teachers in the same ways that they have continued to learn and grow as classroom teachers throughout their professional lifetimes. When mentors apply the tenets of teacher research to their mentoring practice and make their inquiries transparent to their mentees, they create another mechanism for modeling lifelong learning and reflection for the novices with whom they work. In addition, mentoring, like teaching, is riddled with multiple layers of dilemmas and tensions that constantly call for resolution (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007). Through inquiry, these problems can be prioritized and managed in a way that can minimize the tensions between being responsible for the learning outcomes of children and being responsible for the preparation of new teachers. Inquiry can provide a lens to help mentors develop an awareness of, and then articulate, their taken-for-granted assumptions, agendas, aims, and practices. In addition, the teacher research process can offer mentors a way to name, reframe, and transcend problems, thereby making dilemmas of mentoring practice potential sources for wonder, empowerment, and celebration.

What Does an Inquiry-Oriented Approach to Mentoring Look Like?

We would like to share two illustrations of mentors who found that an inquiry stance helped them to problematize the relationship between the learning of their prospective teachers and their own learning as mentors. The first illustration is written by Darby, one of our authors, who used inquiry-oriented mentoring as she worked with a prospective teacher in her middle school history classroom. The second illustration comes from Don, who shared his story with us about how he took an inquiry approach to his mentoring as he worked with two prospective teachers in his fifth-grade classroom.

Illustration 1: Darby’s Account of Her Work as an Inquiry-Oriented Mentor

I regularly hosted secondary social studies interns in my eighth-grade U.S. history classroom. I did so because I was passionate about continually renewing my practice as a teacher through the content area expertise and pedagogical ideas offered by the bright and eager prospective teachers from our partnering university. The next year, I had the opportunity to work with Esteban, an intern from our partnering university. At the same time, I was taking a graduate course that explored issues of language and the power of inquiry. Esteban was a master storyteller, and he used language and narrative as an engaging teaching and classroom management tool. However, he also brought with him verbal behaviors and incoming beliefs about authority and respect that were in direct opposition to my professional values and aims as an edu-
I later found out that Esteban had come to associate these beliefs and behaviors with teaching from his secondary school experiences in an all-boys Jesuit school. I had read literature on the power that apprenticeships of observation have in shaping the incoming beliefs of prospective teachers. I wondered how we could work together to make his incoming beliefs conscious enough to be critically examined; however, the more urgent difficulty I had came out of my journal:

How do I help [Esteban] change his behaviors enough so he doesn’t get fired from his first job? How do I do that at the same time I let him explore and make his own choices so that he is empowered as an agent of change? . . . Most of all, how do I give him enough freedom to learn while maintaining the [psychological safety] of my students at the same time?

This dilemma led me to wonder how we could use Esteban’s storytelling as a place to reframe his perspective, or weave new threads into his story, of what it looks like and sounds like to be an effective social studies teacher in a public school setting. Within this process, I wanted to help him explore and then experience alternative views related to respect and authority in ways that would expand, rather than hinder, his practice. I had just read about transformational learning, a concept offered by Jack Mezirow (2000). Mezirow says that adults make meaning by working from within their historical belief systems and that it is through reflective discourse and dialogue that they can significantly change and transform these meanings. I thought about getting Esteban to tell his stories, as rooted in his historical apprenticeship in the Jesuit school, and then helping him reflect on these stories through powerful dialogue with his students, his colleagues, and myself; as such, I thought that he might be able to restory his idea of what it looks like and sounds like to be a teacher worthy of respect. I then believed that the inconsistencies in his class management skills and his rocky relationships with the students would improve.

To gain insights into my wondering, Esteban agreed to let me study his professional growth during his internship. In addition, I examined my own professional growth as a mentor through this process. Together, Esteban and I engaged in systematic data collection that came from a shared journal, which we passed back and forth, as well as from taped interviews, observations, field notes, focus groups with our students, and audio recordings captured from our daily lunchtime spent with one of my mentors, a 1st-year teacher, and another intern. Finally, we used the Teacher Cam, a video camera that students and I used to capture Esteban when he went into a storytelling episode. Esteban and I invited our students to participate in our coinquiry as a way to model and reinforce the inquiry strand within our social studies curriculum. We wanted to share our ongoing learning and renewal with our students, as well as gain their valuable perspectives as they witnessed this journey.

The data collection process itself offered Esteban and me a constant reminder of the nature of our work, which centered on inquiring into how he could be a better teacher and how I could be a better mentor. I believe that our collecting and analyzing data as a team accelerated this process for both of us. Our lunchtime dialogue with colleagues was one of the most powerful places that Esteban’s original image of an authoritative teacher was transformed, as evident in transcripts of these taped sessions. In these conversations, our colleagues respected and deeply understood Esteban’s incoming beliefs but also challenged them with varying degrees of nudging. In these sessions, I consciously worked to recast stories of Esteban’s teaching that occurred earlier in the day; I did so in ways that challenged what he perceived as failure on his part and that reframed the episodes as genuine success from my point of view.

Over time his stories about what it means to be in a position of authority shifted from themes of his being entitled to automatic respect to those of coming to earn respect from his students. There was no shortcut for this. Thus, his stories began to reveal a new strand of understanding about respect. In them, respect came through Esteban’s hard work of modeling and practicing ideal behaviors that
he and I (and the students) believed defined a
democratic classroom community. He found
that the values behind these behaviors could
also support a strong social studies pedagogy in
which young adolescents find their voices
while respecting those of others.

At the end of the internship, Esteban re-
ceived this anonymous note from a student:

Dear Mr. B.,
The favorite thing that we did was
talking. I don’t mean you and me person-
ally talking but the whole class talking to
you and you talking back. I have a lot of
respect for you Mr. B. You’re a great
teacher and you’ll of course do well with
your own class. Some advice. . . . Just lis-
ten to Ms. D. on that one. Also listen to
your students. That’s right—your stu-
dents. You now share this class with Ms.
D. We’re all your students now.

I believe that the inquiry into my own mentor-
ing practices helped Esteban become a better
teacher and me, a better mentor. The process of
inquiry gave us a framework that I have since
identified and adapted from the New London
Group’s (1996) development for an effective
pedagogy for multiliteracies. This group identi-
ﬁes four dimensions that need to be applied to
adult learning: overt instruction, situated prac-
tice, critical framing, and transformation.

Through my inquiry into my mentoring prac-
tices, I found the need to provide overt instruc-
tion by explicitly pointing out to Esteban mul-
tiple points of view regarding concepts of
authority and respect. This was done in collab-
oration with my colleagues. The classroom then
provided a real-life context, or situated prac-
tice, in which Esteban could try on these multi-
ple perspectives and I could collect data on
their impact on his relationship with his stu-
dents. We also did the diﬁcult work of critically
framing, or deconstructing, assumptions that
we had packed within our beliefs about power,
authority, and respect. We were engaged in in-
quiry; as such, the process became a way for us
to respond to the disequilibrium that this un-
learning created for Esteban as well as myself.

Illustration 2: Our Account of
Don’s Work as an Inquiry-Oriented
Mentor

Whereas Darby identiﬁed her work as inquiry-
oriented mentoring and carved out the time to
write about her mentoring experiences, many
mentors use inquiry-oriented mentoring as a
tool for resolving dilemmas of practice while
strengthening their mentoring practice. In
this account, we share another example of
how inquiry-oriented mentoring can emerge
within a PDS.

Don was passionate about novices’ learning
to teach in a PDS and their need to experience
strong, contextually sensitive mentoring during
early ﬁeld experiences. Don recognized that
schools were complex organizations and that he
himself struggled at times to navigate the vari-
ous mandates with the needs of his students; as
such, he believed that his mentoring work
needed to not only help novice teachers under-
stand this complexity but resolve some of it.

Because of his passion, he enjoyed men-
toring prospective teachers from our univer-
sity, early in their program. Each semester,
Don hosted a pair of preinterns who spent ﬁve
mornings a week in his classroom. He always
looked forward to their arrival; that is, he re-
lied on their presence to carry out the targeted
small-group instruction that he believed was
essential to student learning within his class-
room. Although early ﬁeld experiences often
consist of observation and individual student
tutoring efforts, in Don’s room the prospective
teachers were quickly integrated into the rou-
tines of the day.

As pressure began mounting from the
state, district, and school levels, Don felt pres-
sure to make a plan to help his students per-
form well on the state assessment test. Many of
his colleagues voiced that having prospective
teachers in their classrooms during the semes-
ter of preparation for the high-stakes test was
unwise in that it created distractions and inter-
ruptions in the time that they had to prepare
students for the test. This created a terrible
tension for Don. Although he recognized that
integrating the needs of his students and the
prospective teachers was difficult, he refused to
identify this barrier as one that was insur-
mountable. As he pondered the tension, he re-
alized that although he did not want to teach
to the test, he knew that the tested skills were
important to his students’ success and that it
was his responsibility to ensure that his stu-
dents were successful. In spite of the tension,
Don remained committed to mentoring new
teachers. He began to brainstorm how to utilize
his mentees effectively during the month of
February, where all attention in his school
turned to preparing students for high-stakes
testing. In addition, he went one step further.
Don began to think about how he could help
his mentees learn about the contextual influ-
ences related to preparing students for high-
stakes tests and the dilemmas associated with
this area of curricular decision making.

In response to this challenge, Don turned
to teacher research to explore his dilemma and
to identify ways to integrate his mentees into
the dilemma’s solution. Don had worked for
many years coaching prospective teachers and
their inquiry. He used teacher inquiry as a sys-
tematic way to study his own teaching practice
each year, which had become a tradition in
the culture of Don’s PDS.

Informed with the inquiry tools, Don began
by crafting this inquiry question: “In what
ways can interns be effectively utilized to help
my students prepare for a high-stakes test?” In
addition to answering his overarching ques-
tion, he had a number of subquestions that he
wanted to explore. He wondered whether he
could focus on preparing students for the state
assessment in a way that would also foster a
meaningful learning experience for novice
teachers. He also wanted to figure out how to
negotiate the tension that existed between his
commitment to mentoring and his reluctance
to relinquish complete control of leading the
instructional time during the month of Febru-
ary. What if his students would not get the
preparation that they needed to perform well
on the state assessment test that month?

To gain insights into his wondering, Don
shared his question with his interns Ann and
Carla. This discussion helped the interns un-
derstand the pressures that he was feeling and
that they themselves would soon experience as
they moved into their own classrooms. They
decided that the first task that Ann and Carla
could help with was the preassessment of every
student’s math skills. Initial data such as these
on each student could be powerful informa-
tion for designing instruction to prepare stu-
dents as a whole for the state assessment. Don
knew that, logistically, he could never have
collected these data without his mentees’ help.
These math preassessments became the first
form of data used for informing his instruction
and answering his mentoring question.

After collecting the student data, the three
of them analyzed the preassessments together.
As Don talked through the data, identifying
the patterns along the way, Ann and Carla wit-
nessed how a teacher thinks about content,
skills, and students. Ann and Carla shared ins-
ights that they gleaned from the student data.
From their collaborative analysis, they ascer-
tained that all the students were weak in their
graphing skills, which Don knew would be a
substantial part of the state assessment.

Given their preliminary data, Don and his
mentees decided to target three areas for math
literacy instruction: how to read a graph, how
to make a graph, and how to solve word prob-
lems utilizing a graph. They decided that they
could keep a closer eye on the students’ devel-
oment in these areas if they lowered the
teacher–student ratio—namely, by each work-
ing with a small group. Ann, Carla, and Don
worked to design small-group lessons on each
component of graphing that they had targeted
for instruction.

During the next week, Don organized his
morning math time into stations. A third of
the class worked with Don, a third with Ann,
and a third with Carla. Working with a small
group, Don, Ann, and Carla could each adjust
their lessons, being responsive to the children
in their groups. As they worked with their
small groups, they kept detailed records on each learner and how his or her graphing skills were developing. Over the course of the week, all learners rotated through each group, and the record book rotated with them so that each teacher became privy to the students’ struggles and strengths at previous stations.

As Don implemented this plan, he collected data that included the original pre-assessments, the lesson plans that the three of them had developed, records of student learning at each station, and interviews with his mentees that occurred at the end of the station week. Don also kept his own journal. At the end of each week, the three of them met to discuss the data related to student, mentee, and mentor learning. They were positioned to make sense of learning across these three groups. As they reviewed their progress, they identified ways to improve their collaboration, building on the needs of the students and the skills of each teacher.

When Don analyzed the final data, he discovered that novices could indeed be effectively utilized in the critical month of February and that they could simultaneously learn about teaching by helping to prepare students for a high-stakes test. His mentees learned about planning, using student data to guide instruction, collaborating with others, managing small-group instruction, and organizing and managing a classroom. They even had the opportunity to explore some of the politics and pressures of high-stakes assessment and its implications for teaching. They had access to a teacher’s thinking as Don talked aloud about his sense making and concerns along the way.

Don expressed to us that had he not engaged in this inquiry, he would never have learned how to transform an unfavorable situation—such as extreme administrative pressure to focus on state test preparation—and turn it into a powerful learning situation for everyone, including novice teachers. Without including inquiry into his mentoring, Don reflected that he may have just given up his role as a mentor altogether. The next stage, he believed, was to share his inquiry with his colleagues—namely, those who also struggled with the challenge of integrating prospective teachers into the classroom during a time of intense accountability pressures.

Why Are PDSs a Critical Context for Inquiry-Oriented Mentoring to Take Place?

Inquiry is already used as a tool in the PDS for improving teaching, precisely because of the inherent complexity of the act. These illustrations make transparent how the tensions and dilemmas associated with the complexity of mentoring can be unearthed, explored, and resolved through the inquiry process. The endeavor of mentoring prospective teachers in the PDS deserves to be supported, explored, and developed through inquiry. Little attention has been given to the development of the mentors’ role within the PDS and the vehicles that must be in place to support mentors’ ongoing professional development as school-based teacher educators. One way to support the ongoing development of mentors is to regularly meet with them to engage in a systematic study of their practice as a part of their mentoring work within the PDS. As discussed in these illustrations, teacher research offers a powerful tool for transforming and building a mentoring practice.

In addition to building one’s own practice, inquiry-oriented mentoring provides a tool for mentors to systematically contribute to the literature on mentoring. By making public the inquiry work of mentor teachers, we can unveil the nuances and complexities of this professional role. In doing so, we expand the Holmes Group’s original vision, which upholds the need for including the mentor teachers’ experiences in PDS partnership work. The PDS is where a strong knowledge base for inquiry-oriented mentoring practices is just waiting to be generated, thus making it a potential nexus for research and practice in mentoring. The PDS is an appropriate place for such work because one of its primary goals is to mentor teachers into the profession. Inquiry needs to influence the craft of mentoring for the entire teacher education profession.
References


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