



An On-line Journal for Teacher Research

A Book Review – *Digging Deeper into Action Research: A Teacher Inquirer’s Field Guide*

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

It was shortly after the fall harvest/midterm that I picked up *Digging Deeper into Action Research: A Teacher Inquirer’s Field Guide* by Nancy Fichtman Dana (2013). As I began digging into the text, I also was making preparations to guide beginning teacher candidates in my “Literacy in the Content Areas” course to initiate their own small-scale inquiry project at their Professional Development School (PDS) field sites. Additionally, I was in the process of giving shape to an inquiry project of my own, centered on my beginning teacher candidates’ observations on disciplinary literacy in their field experience. The book, a quick read consisting of six chapters just shy of 100 pages, exceeded my expectations. Dana’s work offered immediate relevance and practical application for myself and the beginning teacher candidates in my course.

According to various reference materials I consulted, a *field guide* is generally associated with aiding readers in the process of identifying birds, wildlife, and other occurrences in nature. The following descriptive phrases provide some standards associated with field guides: “tailored to help users”, “frequently include pictures, photographs, and paintings”, “allows readers to peruse, skim, or window-shop”, “intended for amateurs or non-specialists as well as experts”, and “expands the distribution of findings.” Following these genre parameters, Dana’s book lives up to its “field guide” designation. In lieu of photographs, sketches, or paintings, however, the book includes a range of useful exercises, graphic representations, and a companion DVD. The DVD provides readers/viewers with six short video clips situating the stories of practitioner inquirers, the author, and the invaluable work of transforming classrooms through action research. Whether one is new to teacher research or an experienced practitioner inquirer, Dana’s book (and DVD) will be a welcomed addition to a personal library collection.

Digging Deeper into Action Research proves itself a handy companion for practitioners embarking on the journey of action research. The chapters are organized in logical order, beginning with a brief historical overview of teacher research and its critical contribution to the national dialogue on education. Dana frames educational research as highly contextualized, reminding readers that “outside experts,” those removed from the day-to-day operations of school, have historically set the terms for what counts as research in education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). This first chapter lays the book’s foundation while building interest and motivation for the significance of teacher inquiry.

In the second chapter, Dana defines teacher “wonderings” and provides a litmus test to help readers determine whether their inquiry question is focused on student learning and teaching practice. The book’s third chapter assists readers in sorting out details related to collecting and generating data for an inquiry project. In the chapter, Dana reminds readers that inquiry must be grounded in reputable literature and disrupts notions that *real* research means having an experimental or treatment group in juxtaposition to a “control group.” Sample research plans on topics related to equity in/and education also are explored.

Chapters four (“Analyzing Your Data”) and five (“Presenting Your Research”) each contain valuable information (and respective litmus tests) to assist teacher researchers in reflecting on their presentation of quantitative and qualitative data. Probing questions that guide teacher reflection (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008) are easily identified in the chapters with bullet points and sentence completion stems. Helpful tips for designing and structuring presentations also are outlined. In this chapter, teachers are reminded to balance their presentations by describing teaching acts *and* what was learned as a result of the implementation.

In the book’s final chapter, “Inquiry as Stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009) is revisited and readers are reminded that teacher inquiry is an empowering political stance as much as it is a way to improve one’s own practice. As a “way of being,” inquiry is an intellectual posture that teachers take toward their teaching. An integral role of the professional work of teachers, inquiry is a form of resistance against the isolating and lonely conditions of the profession. Cultivating this stance connects individuals to larger professional communities and social movements committed to disrupting existing inequities in education.

Importantly, Dana acknowledges that individual teachers transformed by their own inquiry projects may be viewed by their colleagues as “impractical,” “dreamy,” “romantic,” or even “overly idealistic.” Indeed, when I introduced the inquiry project assignment in my own classroom, one beginning teacher candidate questioned why any “real” teacher would conduct research in their classroom, given the lack of compensation (e.g., financial, time) for doing so. *Digging Deeper* helps newcomers and skeptics to see that *doing* inquiry is not simply about adding one more “to do” task to a teacher’s already busy schedule. *Doing* inquiry is about collaborating, actively engaging, and articulating the questions that provide and guide learning experiences that are relevant to improving classroom practice and student learning.

Dana’s field guide is not without shortcomings. The book could more robustly convey important research vocabulary, perhaps in the form of a stand-alone glossary of terms. The book also could benefit from the addition of a few more “technical” vocabulary terms worth knowing, including: data triangulation, researcher reflexivity, Likert scale, questionnaire, case study, inductive and deductive reasoning, and critical reflection. Lastly, a couple of editing glitches toward the last few pages of the book were a minor distraction.

Overall, *Digging Deeper into Action Research: A Teacher Inquirer’s Field Guide*’s quick pace, friendly layout, and practical applications provide practitioner inquirers with a text that should be kept near at hand during the inquiry process. As a text that complements other notable classroom research books (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Mills, 2010; Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009), Dana’s field guide stands alone as a text that will “jump start” the inquiry process without overwhelming the reader.

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