

12 Interesting Quotes From Chapter One

Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The Principal as Action Researcher
(Copy and cut apart for use with Block Party Protocol)

<p>Simply stated, administrator inquiry (action research) refers to the process of a principal engaging in systematic, intentional study of his/her own administrative practice and taking action for change based on what he/she learns as a result of the inquiry. Inquiring professionals seek out change and reflect on their practice by posing questions or “wonderings,” collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others. Hence, whether someone is aspiring to be a school administrator or is an administrator with years of experience but faces new educational challenges everyday, administrator inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and school improvement (Dana, 2009, p. 3).</p>	<p>Historically, principals have not had access to tools that can help them untangle the complexity of their work as administrators and bring the focus of their work back to their leadership in teaching and learning. Rather, principals often find themselves focusing on the routine management jobs that must get done and, to survive, responding haphazardly and unsystematically to the constant demand after demand for their time and attention. Administrator inquiry (also referred to as action research) is one tool that can be used by principals to untangle the intricate web of demands in which they become entangled each day, take charge of their own professional development, and become the “head learner” of their school (Dana, 2009, p. 2).</p>
<p>While both the process-product and qualitative research paradigms have generated valuable insights into the teaching and learning process, they have not included the voices of the people who work in the trenches of the school building on a daily basis and are therefore best positioned to understand and better the educational experiences for all members of the schoolhouse – administrators and teachers. Hence, a third research tradition has emerged that highlights the role practitioners play as knowledge generators. This tradition is often referred to as “practitioner inquiry,” “classroom research,” or “action research” (Dana, 2009, p. 5).</p>	<p>Given the complex environments of today’s schools, where much of the decision making and discussion regarding what happens in the schoolhouse occur outside the walls of the school (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), the time seems ripe to equip administrators with the tools of inquiry and thus enable them to cultivate the expertise residing within the schoolhouse itself and to utilize these critical, untapped resources to improve their schools from the inside out rather than the outside in (Dana, 2009, p. 7-8).</p>

<p>Principal action research is when a principal stops and takes a breath, takes a look at the changes or decisions they have made. Gathers information needed to decide if success on the goals that were set have been achieved. That information may be test scores, teacher input, student input, parent input, evidence seen in classrooms, lesson plans, etc.... Compare the results to the goals, talk with all the stakeholders, then actively use this information to plan the next steps, maybe a new direction or keep on keeping on! (Dana, 2009, p. 8)</p>	<p>Perhaps even to a greater extent than for teachers, norms of isolation surround the principalship. “Principals, like teachers, need and treasure collegiality and peer support” (Barth, 1990, p. 83). By engaging in the process of administrator action research with other principals, administrators are forced out of isolation and surround themselves with other professionals conversing about practice in systematic and meaningful ways (Dana, 2009, p. 12).</p>
<p>This movement toward a new model of professional growth based on inquiry into one’s own practice can be powerfully developed, by school districts and building administrators, as a form of professional development for all. By participating in action research, the principal develops a sense of ownership in the knowledge constructed, and this sense of ownership heavily contributes to the possibilities for real change in schools (Dana, 2009, p. 10).</p>	<p>By cultivating an inquiry stance toward practice, principals and teachers play a critical role in enhancing their own professional growth and ultimately the experience of schooling for children. Thus, an inquiry stance is synonymous with professional growth and provides a nontraditional approach to administrator development that can lead to meaningful change for schools and all the people who inhabit them – principals, teachers, and students (Dana, 2009, p. 11)</p>
<p>Research tells us that engagement in inquiry (action research) is an important ingredient for the overall professional health of an educator (Copland, 2003). Yet, many principals do not engage in the process because they just can’t find the time. Even though it is difficult to take the time to inquire, if principals make a commitment and safeguard a little time each week to engage in the process, they will feel better, make important administrative decisions in a more informed and thoughtful way, and return to the never-ending demands of the principalship with more energy to face the challenges of each school day (Dana, 2009, p. 16).</p>	<p>Administrator action research differs from traditional professional development for principals, which has typically focused on the knowledge of an outside “expert” – what others have referred to as “sit and get.” This traditional model of professional growth, usually delivered in the form of workshops, may appear an efficient method of disseminating information but often does not result in real and meaningful change in schools. Those dissatisfied with the traditional model of professional development suggest a need for new approaches, like action research, that enhance professional growth and lead to real change (Dana, 2009, p. 10).</p>

Engagement in principal action research enables me to see things I wouldn't ordinarily see in my school or building when I don't make the time to step back, pose questions, really look at all kinds of data, read, talk with other administrators as well as my teachers and the students in my building, and commit to continuous school improvement. This is hard to do in the midst of the craziness of each school day, but once you engage in the process, you see how incredibly valuable and important it is. Inquiring into practice has become a part of who I am and what I do as a principal, and I can't imagine doing my job without the insights engagement in action research can bring (Dana, 2009, p. 9).

Inquiry (Action Research) is different from traditional professional development I've experienced in the past as a principal because it's introspective; it's not me sitting down in a chair and somebody else, who doesn't know me, my school, my teachers, my community, or my kids, telling me what I should be doing – the traditional “sit and get” or “spray and pray” professional development where you go, you listen, you get what you get, and maybe you use it and maybe you don't. Rather than someone else telling me what I should be doing *to* my teachers and *to* my students, through engagement in action research I'm learning *with* my teachers and *with* the students in my building by closely taking a really hard look at what I'm already doing and what I need to do to change it (Dana, 2009, p.8).