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Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The Principal as Action Researcher

A book review by Thomas G. Ryan

Dana, N. F. (2009). *Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The Principal as Action Researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The principal as action researcher is a book that can be placed on the same shelf as many other action research resources that are written to support, guide, and improve the practice of educators. However, this text distinguishes itself from the many books on action research by aiming to support and guide school leaders. Principals are often left to their own devices to interpret and extend texts related to education and educational research. There are few resources that lead principals through the action research process that can be critical for faculty professional development. In electing to address this issue, the author, Nancy Fichtman Dana, has chosen to open the text with a passage penned by Michael Fullan, an expert in change and leadership in education. With this endorsement, the book is instantly credible in my eyes as this foreword complements and dissects the book in an encouraging and economical manner.

We are made aware that the book is written by a best-selling and award-winning author, Nancy Fichtman Dana. A quick look at the text reveals that it is about 220 pages in length and could easily support courses at the post-secondary level or school-based workshops and professional development seminars. The text is carefully edited and easy to read. Within the first few pages, the book invites administrators to investigate their own practices. The author asks: what is meant by

administrator inquiry and how do administrator inquiry and action research differ from traditional educational research. These questions cause readers to reflect and establish an understanding of what action research is and also what it is not. Clarity is essential in all qualitative endeavors and action research is no exception.

The author acknowledges that there is and continues to be a lack of time in schools and this book tackles this problem by asking principals how they find time to engage in inquiry. The author then presents a series of prompts that invite principals to consider what makes some contexts ripe for principal inquiry. Many of my graduate students are uncertain about their research interests and this text could provide a compass for administrators who face this same quandary. Identifying research interests can help graduate students and principals to take necessary first steps. Similarly, schools and districts contemplating action research projects will find that the author has provided critical solutions for busy educators via planning suggestions that include useful exemplars and figures. For instance, Table 2.1 on pages 65 and 66, summarizes passions that a school leader might bring to issues related to staff development, curriculum development, community building, social justice, and school performance. These areas are linked to sample questions that busy

educators can adopt and begin to investigate. This provision saves time and provides a launching pad for school leaders.

Author, Nancy Fichtman Dana, insists that action research is a means to undertake staff and curriculum development while building school culture and nurturing leadership skills that have the potential to improve school outcomes and performance. The usefulness of the text is largely located in its step-by-step approach as it sets out to assist leaders as they develop questions, collect and analyze data, and share their results in the education community. Chapter Three, entitled "The Road Map," details many modes for data collection including field notes, interviews, artifacts, digital images, reflective journals, surveys, and literature. These descriptions include examples that allow readers to further envision various data collection processes. The author's bias is clear from the onset - action research holds much promise and should be a universal tool for fine-tuning educational practice and development.

Specifically, the text illuminates what can occur if an administrator-researcher wishes to include quantitative measures of student

achievement such as standardized test scores, assessment measures, grades and further details possibilities related to interviews, documents, student work, digital pictures, and weblogs. The book is visually appealing and well-organized to increase both easy access and comprehension. Another practical element is a chapter that describes analyzing data in four steps. Terms such as coding and memoing are defined and a helpful chart is presented on page 114 that will assist teams of educators with their data analyses. This is a work-sharing proposition that can build cohesion within schools. Another chapter is dedicated to administrators sharing their research. Rationales are provided and suggestions are made to help presenters construct oral presentations and to write-up their findings. Figures and tables in Chapter 5 illustrate these necessary skills and help readers move forward on their action research journeys. Finally, the author explains the difference between generalizability and transferability as a means to enhance inquiry quality. In sum, I recommend this text as a practical handbook for principal action researchers who strive to lead with knowledge and passion.