



## **Deweyan Inquiry as a Means of Transforming the Culture of Family Involvement in a Title I Professional Development School**

**By Christy Tirrell-Corbin & David H. Cooper**

### **Theoretical Framework and Purpose**

Professional Development Schools (PDS) were intended to be a comprehensive approach to total-school reform targeted toward the effects of poverty and educational disadvantage (Holmes Group, 1990; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001). Henry Holmes served as dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Education in the 1920s, and believed that teacher education (both pre-service and in-service) was critical to the success of the nation. In his honor, the Holmes Group identified six essential principles of PDSs: (1) teaching and learning for understanding; (2) creating a learning community; (3) teaching and learning for understanding *for all children*; (4) continuing learning by teachers, teacher educators, and administrators; (5) thoughtful and sustained, long-term inquiry into teaching

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and learning; and (6) inventing a new institution (Holmes Group, 1990).

Collectively the six principles for PDSs were intended to effect broad, systemic changes in education both in schools and in the universities and colleges with which they are in partnership. The scope of these changes includes (a) identifying standards-based, performance assessments in teacher preparation, (b) similarly, applying standards and assessment in ongoing professional development, (c) integrating new-teacher preparation and ongoing professional development to achieve congruence and to alleviate tensions between theory and practice, (d) reforming curriculum both in schools and in universities, and (e) enhancing research and inquiry processes as they aim to improve the profession's understanding of teaching and learning.

The existing literature is quite informative on matters of PDS philosophy and practices, and builds on the 1990 Holmes Group work, *Tomorrow's Schools*, in which the basic principles of a fully functioning PDS were proposed. However, attention in the literature to the effect of PDSs on student learning outcomes has been limited and inconclusive; perhaps because the scope of such an undertaking often impedes success, or as we will argue here, the PDS model has been widely interpreted and implemented without sufficient attention to or designs for raising achievement levels of students. As adopters of the model ourselves, and frustrated by our failure to find evidence of PDS-induced achievement gains, we have taken a step back to examine the *processes* and *contexts* found in PDSs and to test how they might be logically and empirically linked to measurable improvements in achievement.

With that as our purpose, in this article we will (a) put forth a fully articulated model that makes explicit the depth of critical inquiry necessary to produce changes in student achievement, and (b) report the results of a partial application of this model focused on practices known to be associated with student achievement: family involvement in a PDS. Our purpose gives rise to these research questions:

- (1) To what extent is the Deweyan inquiry model capable of explaining how the culture of inquiry in a PDS can produce changes in practice?
- (2) What are the observable markers of sustained, iterative, Deweyan inquiry in a PDS?
- (3) Can an inquiry model of professional development be shown to increase and enhance one factor known to be associated with increased student achievement, i.e., family involvement in education?

#### ***Linking PDS Efforts to Student Achievement: The Role of Inquiry***

Darling-Hammond (2005) contends that the first decade of PDSs was marked by disparate implementation of PDS principles put forward by the Holmes group (1990) and the standards articulated by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2001), thereby making it impractical to determine the "effectiveness" of a PDS based on the broad definition of a school-university partner-

ship. Her contention suggested to us that PDS effectiveness in increasing student achievement can only be determined through a careful examination of *cultural* changes in schools that have significant effects on pedagogical practices within the partnership.

One aspect of cultural change is how professional staff development is carried out in a school (Bier et al., 2010; Theiss & Grigsby, 2010). Professional development in the form of *inquiry* presents an opportunity for expansion of knowledge and skill through a sustained exploration of issues, which is in sharp contrast to the model of a single workshop for teachers or presentation by outside experts. Further, inquiry is an inherently iterative process of reflection on evidence, planning, implementation, assessment and further reflection. It has the potential to capitalize on the collective expertise of school-based and university faculty in contrast to the top-down, authoritarian (“ivory tower”) expert model. Having facilitated inquiry groups in PDSs for more than two decades and convinced of their effectiveness in changing school cultures, we went to the literature in search of empirical evidence to bolster our claim.

A careful reading of Crockett’s (2002) application of a Deweyan framework for describing the inquiry process in professional development was a pivotal moment for us. For our purposes the major finding of her study of inquiring teachers was the author’s assertion that (1) conflict in the Deweyan sense (i.e., confrontation of an instructional dilemma) is a *good* thing to achieve in the context of professional development, and (2) “analyzing student *work* produced conflict among the four teachers in ways that other activities undertaken by the inquiry group in this study did not” (p. 617, emphasis added).

King (2002) also found impressive results when inquiry consisted of honest and in-depth examination of both teaching practices and school policies. King’s study focused on inquiry grounded in critical questioning, which required teachers to question not only their own pedagogy but also that of their colleagues. As with Crockett (2002), King found that incongruence of beliefs among teachers facilitated higher-level thinking and an increased reliance on data and research to support beliefs or practices.

### **Deweyan Inquiry Model**

While PDSs provide a comprehensive approach to increasing student achievement, there is limited evidence of such increases (Cooper & Corbin, 2006; Grissom & Petrosko, 2005). Therefore, we contend that expecting a PDS to produce such results is unreasonable in the absence of a fully articulated process, linking the PDS structures and functions to more proximal causes of learning. Consequently, we believe that recursive and sustained inquiry, as illustrated in our Deweyan Inquiry Model (see Appendix A), is not only essential to pedagogical change, but also is made possible in a fully functioning PDS.

Building on Holmes Group Principle #5 which emphasizes inquiry, we con-

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structured a conceptual model that locates inquiry within the PDS and connects it to improved practices, as identified in School Improvement Plans (SIP) that can facilitate school change. Borrowing from and extending Crockett's and King's applications of Deweyan (Dewey, 1916 & 1933) conflict in the context of professional development, we asserted the need for a sustained and recursive process, embedded in a culture of critical inquiry, which provided occasions for practicing professionals (1) to challenge their own and one another's assumptions, and (2) to rely on data to resolve pedagogical and other dilemmas of practice. Out of this recursive and sustained process are projected to come: *Improved Pedagogy*, *Student Understanding* and ultimately measurable increases in *Student Achievement*. These are entirely consistent with the Holmes PDS Principles that we outlined at the outset of our study.

Based on our reading of Crockett (2002) and King (2002) as well as our own direct experience in conducting collaborative PDS-based inquiry, we place sustained, recursive *Deweyan Inquiry* at the beginning of a sequence (see Appendix A) leading to Student Understanding (Gardner, 1991). We are not the first to assert the importance of *sustained* inquiry (Evertson, 1987), but we place it in a recursive process that drives and is driven by the Deweyan Conflicts described by Crockett (2002) and School Improvement Plans (SIP). *Improved Pedagogy* is expected to come as a consequence of a recursive and sustained inquiry process. This type of in-depth exploration of pedagogy is essential to pedagogical change and requires challenging one's own assumptions and practices as well as being subjected to the challenges of colleagues. From *Improved Pedagogy*, we expect to see measurable changes in *Student Understanding* as evidenced in the results of ongoing, formative, authentic classroom assessments (Black & Wiliam, 2003; Brown, 1994; Cooper & Valli, 1996; Heritage, et al., 2009; Wiliam & Thompson, 2008). These assessments may reveal successful teaching and learning, in which we would expect similarly positive results to be in evidence on the annual *high-stakes assessments*. On the other hand, the classroom assessments may reveal deficiencies in student understanding, which in our model would result in cycling back to the point of Deweyan inquiry. The results of the annual high-stakes assessment will either demonstrate academic *goal attainment* (i.e., the meeting of proficiency goals as established by states) or these high-stakes assessments may reveal inadequate levels of proficiency in the aggregate or in disaggregated subgroups. Again, these negative results would trigger a return to the *Sustained and Recursive Inquiry* and the accompanying Deweyan Conflicts.

What follows is an illustrative case of how the model may work to explain and improve achievement. We will report results of an application of the Deweyan Inquiry Model focused on increasing student achievement through increased quantity and quality of family involvement in their children's education. We begin with a brief review of the evidence supporting family involvement as a means of promoting achievement.

**Family Involvement and Student Achievement**

For the purpose of this study, as is the case in the literature, the terms *parent* and *family* are used interchangeably to reference significant adults in a child's life, such as parents, grandparents, guardians and other relatives. The positive relationship between family involvement in a child's education and student achievement is well documented in the literature (Desimone, 1999; Epstein, 2009; Garcia & Jensen, 2009; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems & Holbein, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Konce & Harper, 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006). Henderson and Mapp's (2002) meta-analysis of 51 studies on family involvement in schools affirmed "a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds..." (p. 24). As a result practitioners and policymakers alike have identified parents as a solution to overcoming educational challenges, most notably in the area of academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, 2012a). Nonetheless, most schools lack an institutionalized approach to integrating family involvement as a key component of educating America's children (Trotman, 2002) and, in many cases actively engage in practices which intentionally and unintentionally deter parents from becoming involved in their children's school experiences (De Gaetano, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Quiocho and Daoud (2006) found notable barriers to parent involvement for Latino and other immigrant families who reportedly wanted to be more involved but lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the school or the system. The most commonly articulated barrier to positive family-teacher relationships is poor or nonexistent communication (Koonce & Harper, Jr. 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006) frequently leading to misperceptions on both parts regarding the level of interest in and commitment to the child's academic achievement. Conversely, high-performing schools placed a high value on parent involvement encouraged through (a) a welcoming environment, stressing communication and personal contact and (b) structural accommodations, such as translators (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Schribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999). Furthermore, Koonce and Harper (2005) found African-American mothers to have improved their parenting and advocacy skills when teachers and school administrators cultivated positive relationships.

The literature supports the importance of family involvement yet evidence suggests both perceived and actual barriers significantly impede a family's ability to optimize the impact they have on their child's academic achievement and educational success. Although the aforementioned research focuses on school-based practices that prevent and/or enhance effective family involvement, the following section will address the roles of teacher education and professional development in preparing teachers to both promote parent involvement and interact with families in a culturally responsive manner.

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### ***Recursive and Sustained Inquiry: Focus on Family Involvement***

The involvement of families in the schools attended by their children occurs at the interface of at least two and typically many cultures: the school culture and the many cultures represented by the families. Bridging these cultural boundaries presents challenges to school personnel. Although American schools are increasingly diverse, those represented in the teaching profession remain largely white (U. S. Department of Education, 2012b), middle-class females whose knowledge of culturally responsive practices are often restricted to their own educational experiences (Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple, 2005; Howard, 2005; Sleeter, 2001). White, middle-class definitions of parent involvement typically include volunteerism during the school day, participation in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and homework oversight (Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple, 2005). Although parent involvement may once have looked to members of the mainstream culture very much like the aforementioned definition, the changing demographic of American families clearly suggests such a model has limited application in contemporary society (Daniel-White, 2002; Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple, 2005; Jeynes, 2006; Koonce & Harper, Jr, 2005, Mapp, Johnson, Strickland & Meza, 2008), and perhaps never did. Moreover, Daniel-White (2002) contended that parent involvement opportunities designed to include all parents in their children's education actually took a *cultural deficit approach* to parenting through exclusion of and insensitivity to the cultural values of ethnic minority parents.

To compound the problem, teachers are often ill prepared to engage parents in their children's education, primarily in culturally respectful and responsive ways. In fact, teacher education and staff development initiatives focused on outreach strategies responsive to family structure, culture and responsibilities only began in the early 2000s (Howard, 2005). In a national survey, Hiatt-Michael (2001) found only 7 colleges of education addressed cultural, family outreach practices in any teacher education classes, while others offered only a cursory approach to these issues. De Gaetano (2007) contends that teachers will only be fully prepared to work collaboratively and respectfully with all families if school and higher education faculty engage pre-service and in-service teachers in challenging dialogue around issues of ethnicity, language and SES.

### ***Family Involvement in a PDS***

Given that PDSs are a comprehensive approach to total school reform targeted toward the effects of poverty and educational disadvantage (Holmes Group, 1990), it is appropriate for practitioners to examine a Title I PDS's culture of family involvement. It is equally as important for school personnel to analyze the inquiry process that has the potential to raise cultural issues to the level of consciousness where they could be mobilized for the sake of increased achievement in the school. In Appendix B, an adaptation of our earlier model, we expect to see (a) *Deweyan Inquiry* result in (b) *Improved Practices* (e.g., family outreach efforts) resulting in (c) increased

*Family Involvement*. In contrast, implementation of improved practices that fail to increase *Family Involvement*, results in cycling back to the point of *Deweyan* conflict in the context of sustained *inquiry*. The results of either *formative or high-stakes assessments* will either demonstrate *academic attainment* or reveal inadequate levels of proficiency in the aggregate or in disaggregated subgroups. Again, these negative results would trigger a return to the *Sustained and Recursive Inquiry*. The methods and illustrative results reported below demonstrate how implementation of the partial model (indicated in Appendix B with solid lines) produced changes in a PDS with a large minority and English Language Learner (ELL) population.

## **Methodology**

In the following section we present the methods used to test a portion of the model of PDS-embedded inquiry and its possible effects on the practices of the school. The present investigation does not carry through to the point of measurement of student achievement; rather we are attempting to establish that the initial stages of our model are valid with respect to the relationship of inquiry to improved practices.

### **Setting and Participants**

The school was an urban, Title I, primary school (pre-K through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade) in the mid-Atlantic region, designated as a Professional Development School (PDS) in partnership with the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Program at a large, public university. At the time the project commenced the official school enrollment was 394: 19.5% African American, 13.5% Asian, 60.9% Hispanic and 6.1% White. The FARMs rate was 73.9%, and 37.1% of the children received ESOL services. Although there was some very minor variation in the demographic data over the course of the study, the demographic profile present at inception of the study remained largely consistent.

The principal of this PDS had a long established commitment to the inquiry process having been the principal of another school, one of the first PDSs established in the state in the early 1990s. When she moved to the present school she forged another PDS partnership with the University and quickly worked with University faculty members to successfully introduce the inquiry process to her new colleagues. As a result, it was fairly common to have three to four inquiry groups running concurrently.

In addition to the principal's commitment, the success of inquiry at the prior and present schools was largely dependent upon key factors: (1) topics were *teacher* initiated, and drawn from the school improvement plan; (2) participation was voluntary; (3) inquiry groups met during the school day with classroom coverage largely provided by interns (student teachers); and (4) there was cross-grade level participation. While participation was voluntary, the culture of the school became

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so grounded in the inquiry model of professional development that those who chose not to participate were often considered outliers. Consequently, the *voluntary* nature of participation may have evolved into an *expectation* of participation in one of the multiple inquiry options that occurred throughout the later semesters of this particular inquiry group.

Participants were cross-grade level classroom teachers, specialists (e.g., Reading, ESOL, Gifted and Talented, Physical Education and Special education), administrators and undergraduate students who were completing their year-long internship in this PDS. Inquiry group members were predominantly female, ethnically diverse and had a range of teaching experiences from pre-service teachers to 25-year veterans. Across the four-year span of the study, there were 44 total participants in the inquiry group process with approximately one-third of participants engaging in the inquiry process over the entire seven semesters. Although the discussion evolved over the four academic years, the overarching goal of the group was to both increase and enhance family involvement in their children's education.

Inquiry groups (referred to elsewhere as professional study groups, learning communities, research groups, etc.) were formed based on goals articulated in school improvement plans, professional development needs, and interests of school-based professionals. Participants' expertise and experience was at the core of the inquiry process, whereby every group member was encouraged to participate in the discussions and subsequent actions on a continuous basis.

The inquiry group model is the primary vehicle for delivery of school-based professional development in this university's Early Childhood Education (ECE) PDSs. Teachers and administrators brought their experiences and questions to each session, were frequently asked to read an empirical article in advance, and were occasionally asked to bring or collect informal data (e.g., how many family members attended a classroom event, rate of homework completion, results of conversations with select parents about educational practices in their home country, etc.). A facilitator, who is a faculty member from the university and co-author, guided the discussion and focus of the group through infusion of research findings and probing questions. The facilitator provided structure, order and relevant research information, but did not control, direct, or dominate the group. Inquiry groups met three times during the semester, for two hours per session, during the school day. In addition to facilitating the inquiry group the university faculty member also served on the school improvement team and attended both Back to School and Family Learning Nights, thereby developing relationships (and trust) throughout the school community and across contexts.

#### **Data**

The primary data source was detailed inquiry group minutes taken over 15 sessions, which were typed onto a laptop for electronic dissemination to all school personnel and to University faculty members directly involved in this particular



PDS. With three exceptions, due to administrative commitments, minutes were taken by the school principal, who, except for recording the minutes, was a mostly passive participant in the inquiry process. In the absence of the principal minutes were taken by another inquiry group participant.

Over the four years of the inquiry process many new and revised school-wide practices were implemented, which allowed for varied data collection. In addition to the inquiry group minutes, school administrators compiled evaluation data for Back to School Night, literacy-focused Family Learning Nights, Saturday Parent-Child Field Trips, and parent-teacher conference attendance rates, all of which showed an increase in family involvement across all demographic groups.

## **Results**

A qualitative analysis of minutes from the inquiry group allowed us to observe changes within individuals, as well as the group, identify interpersonal exchanges/challenges (Deweyan Conflict) between colleagues, collaborative and deliberate efforts to facilitate school change, evidence of newly implemented and improved practices, evidence of increased family involvement, and goal proficiency in the form of improved family involvement in this PDS.

### ***The Deweyan Inquiry Process Reveals Conflict***

Inquiry participation required members to explore their values and practices working with minority populations and to question ingrained personal and school-wide policies and procedures. The first three semesters of the inquiry group required participants to actively and reflectively challenge the beliefs and practices of themselves and their colleagues. One of the earliest, and perhaps most unexpected, challenges was agreeing on a common definition of family involvement. The next task focused on the role and route the school should take in promoting increased family involvement. For example, one participant said, “We try to teach children self-confidence but it’s just as important to build this in their parents. Too many parents feel they have nothing to offer and we need to help them with this.” A respondent, “Parent involvement is so individual. Parents’ needs have to be met before they can meet their children’s needs. I know a teacher who created an after school class just to teach parents to read and write.” During the third session of the first semester one teacher stated, “I’m most struck with the notion that you only have one time to make a first impression. If you hook them, then you’ve got them or you can totally turn them off.”

Although all participants voluntarily joined the inquiry group to increase family involvement in their respective classrooms and school, all did not hold the same perceptions of family involvement nor did they possess the same values. For example, when one group member asked, “What about the parents that don’t care?” came the admonishment of another member who said, “Teachers should not assume

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parents don't care." Another member cautioned "You should stop imposing your values on other parents."

After four semesters focused on family involvement the nature of the dialogue shifted from a focus on increasing family involvement to understanding and respecting the different cultures represented in the school community. One member questioned a colleague, "Why are we always looking at culture as a barrier rather than something to embrace?" Another teacher observed that teachers/administrators "push academics as what parents want for their kids" when many immigrant parents tell teachers "All I want is something better for my kids than I had." Another teacher concurred, "We have to get back to what parents want for their kids. They all want something better than they had. We have a culture focused on all [children] going to college, but many immigrant parents just want their children to read and write."

The nature of the dialogue summarized above illustrates Deweyan conflict through the challenging of one's colleagues and the questioning of one's own assumptions, which we believe essential to a culture of critical inquiry. Only after the challenges were put forth and discussed did the group move toward the initial, more tangible goal of "...making Back to School Night more beneficial to parents." Throughout the process the facilitator pushed participants to articulate and/or justify the purpose of suggested or recommended practices. It was during that process that members came to realize that many ingrained policies, procedures, and events existed due to erroneous assumptions that such practices were required, when in fact things were being done "just because they had always been done that way."

#### **Conflicts Stimulate Implementation of New Practices**

After agreeing to make Back to School Night more beneficial to parents the group's next challenge was to define "beneficial." Back to School Night had a long history as a didactic experience for families who spent the vast majority of the evening being "talked at" and handed a wealth of written information, mostly in English, while in a very large group setting.

In an effort to define "beneficial," inquiry participants discussed issues related to parental trust and comfort, the individuality of family involvement, cultural differences, cultural expectations, and the importance of establishing a positive parent-teacher relationship from the outset. The evolution of the dialogue resulted in the decision to redesign the event with the ultimate goals of (1) building a sense of community and (2) establishing relationships between parents and teachers, parents and specialists (ESOL teachers, Reading Recovery Teachers, Counselors, Math Coach, Music and Arts Teachers, Physical Education Teacher, etc.), as well as parents with parents.

*Evidence of effective practices.* By all accounts, from parents and staff alike, the redesign of Back to School Night was a success. In keeping with the school system model of "plus" and "delta" to evaluate the effectiveness of meetings and events,

the staff was asked to identify that which they believed went well and changes that would make Back to School Night better in the future.

Under the heading of, "What worked well?"

- *"Having parents mingle and meet the teacher and other parents"*
- *"Opportunities for parents to meet with specialists."*
- *"Having a greeter at each door."*
- *"Giving parents time in classrooms."*
- *"Appreciation for the independence teachers were given to plan their individual classroom meetings."*
- *"Translators."*

Under the heading of, "Changes to make it better?"

- *"Better time management for grade level presentations."*
- *"More time for parents to meet with specialists."*
- *"Shorter teacher presentations."*
- *"Increased staff awareness of their body language and facial expressions when talking with parents."*

### **Cycling Back to Deweyan Inquiry**

Ultimately the school's Parent Involvement Committee assumed responsibility for the continued improvement of Back to School Night. Nonetheless, inquiry group participants' discussion of the evening, as well as a review of staff evaluations (as listed above) led to a strong consensus that many teachers felt uncomfortable talking to and working with adults/parents. One participant acknowledged, "Many teachers are scared when talking with adults," while another said, "I became a teacher to work with children because I didn't want to work with adults." Several others stated they had no formal preparation in working with parents, while another suggested all teachers be given "icebreakers" as a means of initiating parent-teacher communication.

Although the Deweyan Inquiry process explained above led to the successful "Implementation of New and Improved Parent Involvement Practices," the goal of increased family involvement was dependent upon investment in and ownership of this process by the entire staff. Consequently, it was essential for the group to cycle back to the overt Deweyan Inquiry Process to bring to a conscious level the issues of teacher disposition, teacher preparation, and especially *school wide* professional development.

### **A Second Round of New Practices Leads to Increased Family Involvement**

Throughout subsequent semesters of continued inquiry numerous practices were implemented which resulted in increased family involvement in this PDS: Home visits were conducted by several classroom teachers and a Reading Recovery teacher; Family Learning Nights were held six times per academic year with standing room only; and Saturday Parent-Child Field Trips occurred monthly (at

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full capacity). In addition, there was record-setting attendance at the Parent-Teacher Conferences, with 84% of children represented across the school's demographic profile. In addition, five of the 26 classes had 100% attendance; a participation rate highly atypical for a school with a large English Language Learner population and FARM rate of 74% (Planty, et al., 2009).

Koonce and Harper, Jr. (2005) identified *communication* as the number one barrier to positive family-teacher relationships. However, in the words articulated by one inquiry group participant and affirmed by others, "Because the climate of the school is warmer, there is now constant communication with parents." Although we were not able to obtain direct evidence of increased student achievement, Henderson and Mapp's (2002) meta-analysis and the work of others (Desimone, 1999; Epstein, 2009; Garcia & Jensen, 2009; Gonzalez-DeHass, Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Konce & Harper, 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006) suggests the increased quantity and quality of family involvement opportunities had, at the least, the potential to improve student achievement.

#### ***Proficiency Goal Attainment and the Ongoing Cycle of Deweyan Inquiry***

In the last two semesters of the family involvement inquiry group participants made a gradual yet obvious shift of focus away from parent involvement as previously defined. There was a general belief that the goal of the inquiry group and the School Improvement Plan had been fulfilled. In fact, an internal staff survey found 85% of respondents to agree or strongly agree that the parent involvement inquiry group had a positive impact on the school's commitment to family involvement. As one teacher stated, "Parent involvement is now organic" and in the words of another participant, "Parent involvement has become an expectation of employment at this school." However, the depth of the parent-teacher relationship based on cultural respect and sensitivity arose as a source of interest and concern.

#### ***Another Round of Conflicts***

In the final family involvement inquiry session an entirely new and more confrontational set of challenges was posed that addressed race, class, culture and prejudice. Moreover, participants were encouraged, strongly by some, to look inside of themselves, to reflect on the fine line between stereotypes and cultural sensitivity and to explore both the culture of poverty as well as the issues of White privilege. As a result the decision was made to commence a new focus for this inquiry group the following semester focused on *Courageous Conversations about Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2005). Participants believed this book would serve as a vehicle to move their conversations forward while allowing uncomfortable topics to be brought to the table, at least initially, in the third person. Over time, members shared their own personal beliefs and (often painful) experiences, as well as fears, around issues of race. Additionally, group members decided that the "new inquiry group" would be limited to those from the family involvement inquiry group who

had made the decision to engage in honest conversations around race. There was a consensus that current group members had sufficient history and trust among themselves to allow for an open dialogue. After the first semester the group was opened up to the greater school community; all existing members stayed on, but only two new people joined.

Although essential to the process, but unfortunate from a data collection standpoint, the decision was made not to take minutes of the discussion in this particular inquiry group as a way to encourage confidentiality and honest sharing among participants. Consequently, there are no transcripts that allow for analysis of the inquiry process once the issues of race and culture became the central focus. However, the facilitator (first author) recalls anecdotally that the conversations became increasingly personal, open, and, at times, confrontational as issues of race and racism came to the forefront. Participants of color shared personal examples of racism, and African-American teachers shared concerns about the fate of their African-American sons. Consequently elements of the partial model of Deweyan Inquiry continued as the teachers, specialists and administrators of this Title I PDS tackled the ultimate in challenging issues, that of racism.

#### ***Evidence of Proficiency Goal Attainment***

The remaining elements of our Deweyan inquiry model were not tested. However, during the concurrent and subsequent years of this study, this PDS consistently met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all sub-groups as required under No Child Left Behind (U. S. Department of Education, 2004), atypical for schools with similar demographic variables.

#### ***Summary of Findings***

Before discussing our results and offering conclusions we take a moment to summarize our findings with respect to each of our research questions.

*To what extent is the Deweyan inquiry model capable of explaining how the culture of inquiry in a PDS can produce changes in practice?* Our research design lacks the capacity to establish a causal link between the establishment of the culture of inquiry and changes in practice. But the model proved useful in focusing our attention on the school's intentional process of change over several semesters. Having identified the challenge of increasing family involvement in the School Improvement Plan, the staff made the choice to approach it using the inquiry group structure already in place. One of the beauties of this approach to professional development is the commitment of *time* to explore the problem in depth before jumping to solutions. In this case, the members of the inquiry group took time to develop a common understanding of the term *family involvement* and then to explore the members' individual and collective beliefs, experiences and practices. Bringing these beliefs, experiences and practices to the level of conscious

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consideration and overt expression gave rise to the inevitable and ultimately useful challenging of assumptions and clashing of views. Peering through the lens of our model of Deweyan Inquiry we saw how conflict led to further common understandings, transformational learning by teachers, and eventually, strategies for change grounded in extended inquiry. What distinguishes these strategies for change is that they were (a) generated by the members themselves rather than imposed by either administrators or outside experts and (b) implemented with the energy and commitment that is made possible when professionals work through conflicts and *own* the issue. Our model also called attention to how evidence was used both to affirm the partial effectiveness of the solutions and at the same time to point the group toward the next set of challenges, i.e., racial and cultural awareness. The model depicts inquiry as an *iterative* process, and we were able to observe exactly that part of the cycle occurring as the inquiry group moved beyond their initial focus on the global concept of *family involvement* to the more specific matters arising from the school's racial and ethnic diversity.

*What are the observable markers of sustained, iterative, Deweyan inquiry in a PDS?* Both our direct observations and the minutes of the inquiry group meetings provide ample evidence that the critical elements of the Deweyan inquiry model were enacted in this PDS. Most readily demonstrated is the importance of *sustained* inquiry. Seven semesters of engaged and focused work by the staff and one university faculty member (most of which) is documented in the minutes, with approximately one-third of the 44 participants involved for the entire four-year period. As noted earlier, the group transitioned from family involvement to supporting teacher interactions with parents, to cultural study, but this shift in focus was not arbitrary nor imposed as is so often the case in other versions of professional development. Rather the group itself made the transition as a natural outcome of the work they had initiated and the positive results they had achieved.

*Iteration* is a crucial component of any process that involves the collection and use of data for assessment of the effectiveness of actions. The assessment data are only of value when their analysis and interpretation are fed back into the loop, and when a new cycle of planning, implementation, and assessment is launched and repeated as many times as it takes to achieve the goal (or until the goal itself is affirmatively modified). We observed and reported several iterations of this cycling and re-cycling in the inquiry group.

And finally, can the inquiry we observed be fairly characterized as *Deweyan*? Earlier we reviewed the literature's guidance on interpreting and applying Dewey's definition, arguing that inquiry that (a) elicits conflict and confrontation of (b) an instructional dilemma or analysis of students' work, (c) is grounded in critical and reciprocal questioning of teachers' beliefs and practices, and (d) occasions higher-level and evidence-based thinking satisfies Dewey's criteria and distinguishes Deweyan Inquiry from variations now widely practiced in schools. We observed each of

the elements (a) through (d) and described them above. One example will suffice. Recall our finding that the initial round of Deweyan inquiry was an essential step in the design and implementation of new practices intended to increase the level of family involvement. While the evidence at that point supported the assertion that practices were indeed changed and involvement was on the rise (i.e., the re-invented Back to School Night did enjoy greatly increased participation and satisfaction), the staff members in the inquiry group recognized that limitations remained, and that their long-term success was not assured. Rather their initial success pulled back the cover to reveal issues in some teachers' dispositions and preparation as well as a far-from-ideal culture of family involvement. Fortunately for the school, the culture of *inquiry* was by that time well-established, and so the next step for the inquiry group was almost self-evident: *inquire again!*

*Can an inquiry model of professional development be shown to increase and enhance one factor known to be associated with increased student achievement, i.e., family involvement in education?* Our findings strongly suggest the answer to this research question is a resounding “yes.” The best evidence of increased family involvement was the 84% school-wide participation rate in parent-teacher conferences (with five classrooms having 100% participation) and standing-room-only attendance at Family Learning Nights. The best examples of enhancements to family involvement were home visits by teachers and specialists, as well as Saturday field trips for students, their families and teachers. As previously stated, an internal staff survey found 85% of respondents to agree or strongly agree that the parent involvement inquiry group had a positive impact on the school's commitment to family involvement. During one of the final inquiry sessions focused on family involvement, one teacher stated, “Parent involvement is now organic” and in the words of another participant, “Parent involvement has become an expectation of employment at this school.” Nonetheless, success in actively engaging more family members was not viewed as an end point for this group, especially once one of the members challenged them to “really get to know families” in the school by understanding their experiences, their beliefs and what they wanted for “their children.” It was that challenge, to further enhance family involvement in a deeper and more meaningful, albeit riskier way, that brought the group to the even more onerous task of having “courageous conversations about race and culture.”

While we cannot yet assert a causal relationship from sustained, recursive inquiry on family involvement to gains in student achievement, we are close, having proposed a model that appears to move teachers from problem identification to workable solution, to implementation, evidence of success, and finally sustainable, systemic change. Further, we have initiated a line of inquiry that allows us to test the causal model.

## **Discussion**

In its original conceptualization of PDS, the Holmes Group (1990) raised expectations that there would be direct linkages between this model of teacher education and learning outcomes. As others and we have pointed out, however, the promise has not been fulfilled. Rejecting the possibility that PDS is simply an ineffective intervention for increasing achievement, we chose instead to focus on the practices within the PDS and constructed a model that has the potential to take us from the PDS context to measurable changes in school outcomes. Building on Holmes Group Principle #5 which emphasizes inquiry, we constructed a conceptual model that locates inquiry within the PDS and connects it to improved practices that can facilitate school change. Borrowing from and extending Crockett's (2002) and King's (2002) applications of Deweyan conflict in the context of professional development, we asserted the need for a sustained and recursive process, embedded in a culture of critical inquiry, which provided occasions for practicing professionals to challenge their own and one another's assumptions and to rely on data to resolve pedagogical and other dilemmas of practice. The present investigation is a partial test of the model in that it aimed to document how the culture of inquiry in a PDS can produce changes in practice.

In this particular application of the model we chose not to address student achievement directly, but rather to change practices known to be associated with achievement: namely family involvement (Desimone, 1999; Epstein, 2009; Garcia & Jensen, 2009; Gonzalez-DeHass, Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Koonce & Harper, 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006) in the PDS. Using minutes from inquiry group sessions and documentation of several instances of family involvement, we were able to demonstrate the power of inquiry to take advantage of a Deweyan conflict (Crockett, 2002; King, 2002) to make it possible for teachers to (1) arrive at a common definition of family involvement, (2) acknowledge and respect differences in values held by teachers and parents, and (3) see cultural difference not as a barrier to family involvement but something to embrace (Koonce & Harper, 2005; Quicho & Daoud, 2006). Once the group had moved beyond the Deweyan conflict to make the necessary changes in disposition, they were then able to move to changes in practice, specifically redesign of that epitome of traditional family involvement: Back to School Night. Evaluative data on the results of this redesign and other changes in practice demonstrated the desired increases in all aspects of family involvement. Additional data brought to consciousness a previously unacknowledged discomfort experienced by many teachers, including those both in as well as out of the inquiry group. Specifically this discomfort arose from new expectations that all teachers would have more personal and prolonged interaction with parents. The inquiry group chose then to address this discomfort and recommended specific professional development initiatives as a result, thus demonstrating the importance of the sustained and recursive nature of inquiry.



## Conclusion

We are not the first to suggest how the PDS context, or for that matter any of the variety of university-school partnership models that have been devised, can facilitate student learning. Bier et al. (2012) offered a useful conceptual framework that placed P-12 student learning at the heart (or in their words: the “sweet spot”) of the multi-dimensional collaboration among teachers, teacher candidates, and university faculty. Bier et al. focused their attention on concrete instances of student work that “fuses teacher learning processes with analysis of student learning” (p. 129). Our formulation differs from that of Bier et al. in that we have emphasized the importance of conflict in the Deweyan sense (Crockett, 2002) and critical questioning (King, 2002), as well as the role of formative *assessment* in the analysis of the student work samples.

One teacher said, “Parent involvement is now organic,” suggesting that the culture of the school had evolved as a result of the Deweyan Inquiry process. But further, this perception is indicative that the school, as a PDS, embodied the Holmes Group (1990) principle that envisions a culture of inquiry. As evidence of this cultural evolution, the inquiry group turned its attention to the delicate issues of race, class, culture and prejudice, topics that previously could not have been addressed. Once the Deweyan (1916 & 1933) inquiry model had demonstrated its effectiveness in not only producing improved practices but also in establishing a culture of trust among colleagues, these sensitive topics could be explored and confronted. Professional development in the form of *inquiry* presented an opportunity for expansion of knowledge and skill through a sustained exploration of issues, which is in sharp contrast to the more prevalent model of a single workshop for teachers or presentation by outside experts. Further, inquiry is an inherently iterative process of reflection on evidence, planning, implementation, assessment and further reflection. It has the potential to capitalize on the collective expertise of school-based and university faculty in contrast to the top-down, authoritarian (“ivory tower”) expert model. Thus, our results have made explicit the depth of critical inquiry necessary to produce real and sustainable change in a PDS. Further work along this line of research will apply the fully articulated model both to the increases in student achievement as well as to other measurable changes in school outcomes that are expected of PDSs.

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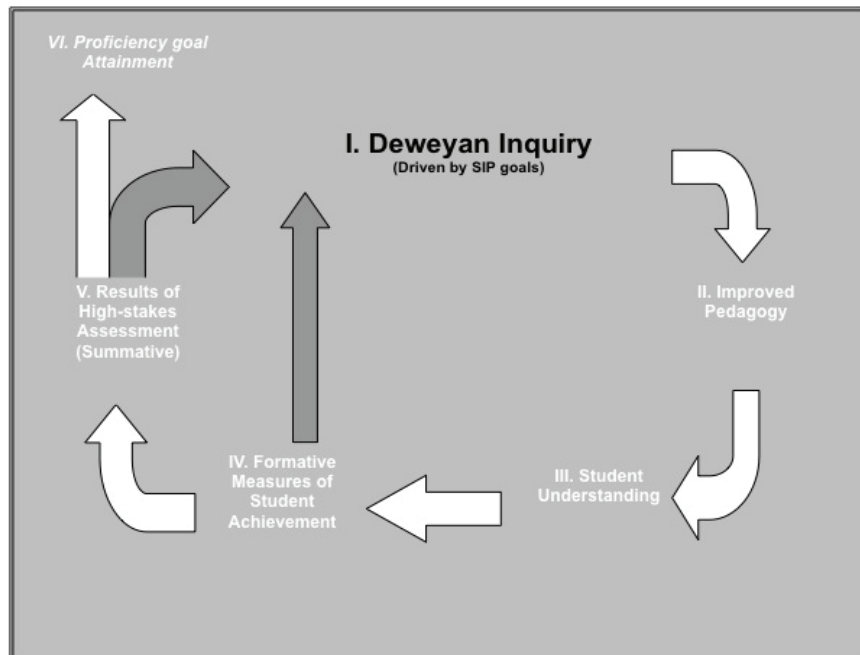
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## **Appendix A**

### **Recursive and Sustained Deweyan Inquiry Model**



**Appendix B**

**Recursive and Sustained Deweyan Inquiry Model for Family Involvement**

