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# Structural diffusion properties of two atypical Dps from *Nostoc punctiforme* disclose interactions with ferredoxins and DNA

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## Highlights

- The dodecamer stability of the two atypical NpDps are pH dependent.
- Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 show DNA binding properties.
- Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 show binding properties upon interaction with NpFdx proteins.
- NpDps5, with structural similarities to bacterioferritins, is also related to Dps proteins, due to its dodecameric structure and DNA binding ability.

## Abstract

Ferritin-like proteins Dps (DNA-binding protein from starved cells) store iron and play a key role in the iron homeostasis in bacteria, yet their iron releasing machinery remains largely unexplored. The electron donor proteins that may interact with Dps and promote the mobilization of the stored iron have hitherto not been identified. Here, we investigate the binding capacity of the two atypical Dps proteins NpDps4 and NpDps5 from *Nostoc punctiforme* to isolated ferredoxins. We report NpDps-ferredoxin interactions by fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) and fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET) methods. Dynamic light scattering, size exclusion chromatography and native gel electrophoresis results show that NpDps4 forms a dodecamer at both pH 6.0 and pH 8.0, while NpDps5 forms a dodecamer only at pH 6.0. In addition, FCS data clearly

reveal that the non-canonical NpDps5 interacts with DNA at pH 6.0. Our spectroscopic analysis shows that [Fe-S] centers of the three recombinantly expressed and isolated ferredoxins are properly incorporated and are consistent with their respective native states. The results support our hypothesis that ferredoxins could be involved in cellular iron homeostasis by interacting with Dps and assisting the release of stored iron.

## **Keywords**

Dps; FRET; FCS; Nostoc punctiforme; Ferredoxins; DLS; Ferritin like proteins

## **Abbreviations**

Dps, DNA-binding proteins; DLS, dynamic light scattering; FRET, fluorescence resonance energy transfer; FCS, fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS); EPR, electron paramagnetic resonance; PSI, photosystem I; Fdx, ferredoxins; EMSA, electrophoretic mobility shift assay; SDS-PAGE, sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis; NpFdx, Dps in Nostoc punctiforme; DNA, deoxyribonucleic acid; ds, double stranded

## **Introduction**

Iron metabolism is thought to be one of the very early important acquisitions in the origin of life, as iron is one of the elements that is required for cells to survive and to be functionally active [1, 4, 36, 54]. Iron is usually found in two interconvertible oxidation states,  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ . However,  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  can oxidize to  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  in the presence of  $\text{O}_2$ .  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  then forms iron hydroxide and precipitates, thus limiting its availability to cells. The oxidation of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  by  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  produces reactive oxygen species (ROS) [1], which damage crucial cell components like DNA, enzymes, and lipids. Therefore, intracellular iron homeostasis needs to be tightly regulated. Prokaryotes and eukaryotes use a family of proteins called ferritin-like proteins to regulate free  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  concentration in the cytosol [35], found in all three domains of life. In bacteria, there are three types of ferritin-like proteins: ferritins (Ftn), bacterioferritins (Bfr), and DNA-binding proteins from starved cells (Dps) [4, 20]. All ferritin-like proteins oxidize  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  to  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  at their ferroxidase centers (FOC), and store the iron as a ferric oxyhydroxide mineral core [20]. Ftn and Bfr are large protein multi-structures (24-mer) that store up to 4500 Fe ions, while Dps are dodecameric (12-mer) proteins that can store about 500 Fe ions. The common working hypothesis is that under low iron conditions, the ferric mineral core is reduced to

soluble  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ , which is released to be utilized by the cell [32, 46, 48, 60, 63]. This reduction step is crucial for the stored iron to re-enter the metabolism, but unfortunately, little is known about this process, and the identity of the donor that assists electron transfer into Dps is unrevealed.

Numerous studies in various bacteria have shown that Dps homologs exhibit efficient DNA protection, against damage by reactive oxygen species, partly by direct physical binding of DNA [38, 65, 44, 16, 27, 58, 12]. Therefore, DNA binding activity is considered as one of the characteristic features of Dps proteins. In contrast, mechanical DNA protection is not one of the core functions of Bfr.

Dps proteins are ubiquitously present in cyanobacteria, where they play a major role in tolerance to oxidative stress, peroxide detoxification, prevention of DNA damage and maintaining the iron homeostasis [34, 23, 41, 37]. Unlike most other prokaryotes, which encode a single Dps, there are five genes annotated as ferritin-like proteins in the multicellular, heterocyst-forming cyanobacterium *Nostoc punctiforme* sp. ATCC 29133 (from here on *N. punctiforme*) [39]. We have previously asserted that these proteins co-exist, and named them NpDps1, NpDps2, NpDps3, NpDps4 and NpDps5 [41]. In a phylogenetic analysis it was shown that NpDps1-3 grouped into distinct clades of typical Dps proteins, while both NpDps4 and NpDps5 clustered with non-canonical groups of ferritin-like proteins. One atypical feature of NpDps4 was the unusual ligand sphere of the FOC, also identified in *e.g.* DpsA-Te from *Thermosynechococcus elongatus* [50, 23]. NpDps5 clustered with, and shared structural features with Bfr, such as harboring the FOCs within the monomers [23]. NpDps5 has been identified as involved in light tolerance in *N. punctiforme*, and an increase in NpDps5 abundance was shown to enhance tolerance to hydrogen peroxide [37], likely due to its role in iron regulation [41]. The functional roles of NpDps4 have not yet been explored. NpDps5 and NpDps4 are associated with a specific type of cell, the heterocyst, as demonstrated by transcriptional and proteomics studies [45, 23]. Heterocysts are formed during nitrogen-depleted conditions in some filamentous cyanobacteria and exhibit an intracellular micro-oxic condition that enable nitrogen fixation [5]. The core enzymes involved in heterocyst metabolism are iron-dependent and  $\text{O}_2$  sensitive. Our hypothesis is that NpDps4 and NpDps5 are involved in the strict control of iron and  $\text{O}_2$  levels in heterocysts.

As mentioned earlier, the chemistry behind the release of ferrous iron from the mineralized iron core of both Bfrs and Dps is largely unknown. This study aimed to identify electron transfer proteins that interact with the atypical NpDps4, and the bacterioferritin-like, NpDps5. Ferredoxins (Fdxs) are soluble electron transfer proteins found ubiquitously in biological organisms. They possess a highly negative redox potential and use their [Fe-S] (iron-sulfur) clusters to act as electron distributors in various metabolic pathways. Fdxs can be classified according to their [Fe-S] clusters, like [2Fe-2S],

[3Fe-4S] and [4Fe-4S], and to the organisms in which they were first isolated [56]. Cyanobacteria strains often have a large number of Fdxs that act as electron donors in photosynthesis, oxidative and metal stress responses and in heterocyst specific metabolism [30, 18, 8, 52]. While clearly being of physiological importance, the biochemical characterization of the Fdxs in cyanobacteria is still insufficient.

Fdxs have also been suggested to be involved in Fe<sup>2+</sup> release Bfr by direct protein-protein interaction [47], and a Fdx from *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* has been shown to interact with, and reduce, the iron core of PaBfr *in vitro* [64, 24]. The interaction of Fdx and Bfr is thus established, but the protein-protein interactions that allow the reduction of the iron-core of Dps are still not known. Our intention with this study was to reveal if Fdxs interact with the two non-canonical Dps proteins of *N. punctiforme*. Despite the advancements in defining the roles of NpDps proteins in various cellular processes, many questions, especially concerning non-canonical Dps proteins, remain unanswered. The crystal structures of a number of Dps proteins have been resolved [65, 29], but the biophysical structural diffusional properties of Dps proteins are still unknown. Here fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) and fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET) has been used to determine whether Dps proteins and Fdxs are interacting or not. In addition, we also explored the possible interaction with DNA, and the multimerization properties of NpDps4 and NpDps5 under various conditions.

## **Materials and methods**

### ***Bacterial strains, media and growth conditions***

This research study was carried out with the heterocyst-forming cyanobacterium *Nostoc punctiforme* strain ATCC 29133-S (known as UCD 153) [13], *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) DH5 $\alpha$  strain and *E. coli* BL21(DE3) strain (Table 1). *E. coli* cells were grown aerobically at 37 °C and 200 rpm in LB (Luria - Bertani) medium. For solid media, 1.5 % agar (Noble agar, BD, Difco, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) was added. 50  $\mu\text{g mL}^{-1}$  ampicillin was added both in solid and liquid LB media. Cyanobacteria were grown in BG11 [49] without the addition of NaNO<sub>3</sub>, at 30 °C and 25 - 40  $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$  in 100 mL E-flasks under shaking at 100 rpm, or in 250 mL - 400 mL E-flasks under aeration and stirring. For solid media, 1% agar (Noble agar, BD, Difco, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) was used. Chlorophyll *a* measurements and light microscopy (Axiostar, ZEISS) on cultures were performed regularly. Cells were harvested by centrifugation and cell pellets were frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80 °C, until further investigation.

**Table 1.** Bacterial strains used in this work

| Strain                                      | Type and information   | Reference/source |
|---|--|------------------|
| <i>Escherichia coli</i> strain DH5 $\alpha$ | <i>Delta M15 Delta(lacZYA-argF) U169 recA1 endA1 hsdR17(rK-mK+) supE44 thi-1 gyrA96 relA1</i>  |                  |
| <i>Escherichia coli</i> strain BL21(DE3)    | <i>[lon] ompT gal (<math>\lambda</math> DE3) [dcm] <math>\Delta</math>hsdS <math>\lambda</math> <math>\lambda</math>sBamHI <math>\Delta</math>EcoRI-B int::(lacI::PlacUV5::T7) i21 <math>\Delta</math>nin5</i> |                  |
| <i>N. punctiforme</i> ATCC 29133-S UCD 153  | Type UCD 153   |                  |

### Cloning of NpDps and NpFdx genes in pSBA13 vector

BioBrick plasmid pSB1A3 vector was (<http://parts.igem.org/Part:pSB1A3>) for heterologous expression of NpDps and NpFdx proteins. A Strep(II)-tag (W-S-H-P-Q-F-E K) was linked via a short 2-alanine linker (GCC GCA) to the 3' end of the targeted cloned gene, to which stop codon (TAA) was fused. The *E. coli* Dps protein-encoding gene, *P0ABT2* (NC\_000913.3), *Npdps4* (*Npun\_R5799*), *Npdps5* (*Npun\_F6212*) and the NpFdx protein-encoding genes, *Npfdx1* (*Npun\_F3727*), *Npfdx9* (*Npun\_F4770*) and *NpfdxH* (*Npun\_R0380*) were amplified from isolated genomic DNA of *E. coli* or *N. punctiforme*, using Overlap Extension (OE) PCR [10]. The constructed vectors were transformed into *E. coli* DH5 $\alpha$  strain using chemical transformation method [22]. The resulting verified correct constructs were named as pVM27, pVM28, pVM29, pVM30, and pVM31 for expression of NpFdx1, NpFdx9, NpFdxH, NpDps4, and NpDps5 respectively (Table 1). Phusion DNA polymerase (Thermo Fisher Scientific) or PfuUltra II Fusion HS DNA Polymerase (Stratagene) were used as a polymerase in the OE PCR. Primers were designed using PrimerX software (<http://bioinformatics.org/primerx/index.html>) and are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Plasmids and primers used in this work

| Plasmid       | Genetic properties                                   | Reference/source |
|---------------|--|------------------|
| p13           | tagged, Amp <sup>r</sup>                             | work             |
| p27           | <i>I</i> cloned into pSBA13, Amp <sup>r</sup>        | work             |
| p28           | <i>9</i> cloned into pSBA13, Amp <sup>r</sup>        | work             |
| p29           | <i>H</i> cloned into pSBA13, Amp <sup>r</sup>        | work             |
| p30           | <i>4</i> cloned into pSBA13, Amp <sup>r</sup>        | work             |
| p31           | <i>5</i> cloned into pSBA13, Amp <sup>r</sup>        | work             |
| Primers       | Primer sequences (5' to 3')                          |                  |
| <i>I</i> _For | CGAGAAAGAGGAGAAATACTAG<br>CAACTTATAAAGTGACACTAATTAAC |                  |
| <i>I</i> _Rev | TTTTCGAATTGGGGATGACTCCATGCGGC<br>GAGTTCTTCTTTGTGA    |                  |
| <i>9</i> _For | CGAGAAAGAGGAGAAATACTAG<br>AAAAAACGAGTAACACTAACCTTC   |                  |
| <i>9</i> _Rev | TTTTCGAATTGGGGATGACTCCATGCGGC                        |                  |

|        |   |
|--------|---|
|        | GTTAGTGGAGATTGTA                                      |
| H_For  | CGAGAAAGAGGAGAAATACTAGATGG<br>CTACCAAGTTAGATTAATCAAC  |
| H_Rev  | TTTTCGAATTGGGGATGACTCCAT<br>GCTACGAGATATGCTTCTTGATGTG |
| s4_For | CGAGAAAGAGGAGAAATACTAGATGTCTGAAAGCGAAACTTTGTT         |
| s4_Rev | TTTTCGAATTGGGGATGACTCCATGCGGCGCTTTGAGCCGCTTGGA        |
| s5_For | CGAGAAAGAGGAGAAATACTAGATGCAAGAACTTGACTATAAAAA<br>TC   |
| s5_Rev | TTTTCGAATTGGGGATGACTCCATGCGGCGCTAAAATCGCGTAGCAT       |
| _For   | CGAGAAAGAGGAGAAATACTAGATGAGTACCGCTAAATTAGTTAA         |
| _Rev   | TTTTCGAATTGGGGATGACTCCATTCGATGTTAGACTCGATAAACCA       |
| A3_For | TCGGCTGCGGCGAGCGG                                     |
| A3_Rev | GCGGTTTGCGTATTGCTCTAGAAGCGG<br>CGAAT                  |
| _For   | GCTTCTAGAGCAATACGCAAACCGCCT<br>TC                     |
| _Rev   | TATTTCTCCTCTTTCTCGAGTATGTGTGAA<br>TTATCCGCTCAC        |
| _For   | GTCATCCCCAATTGAAAAATAACCAGGC<br>AATAAAACGAAAGGC       |
| _Rev   | CACTCAAAGGCGGTAAT                                     |

### ***Overexpression and purification of NpDps and NpFdx proteins***

*E. coli* cells harboring pVM27, pVM28, pVM29, pVM30, and pVM31 were grown at 37 °C and 200 rpm in 500 mL LB medium containing 50 mg mL<sup>-1</sup> ampicillin and additional 0.1 g L<sup>-1</sup> FeCl<sub>3</sub> for the expression of NpFdx1, NpFdx9, NpFdxH, NpDps4, and NpDps5. At an OD<sub>600 nm</sub> of 0.6, protein expression was induced by 1 mM IPTG (isopropyl-beta-D-1-thiogalactopyranoside) for 5 - 6 h. Cells were harvested and the cell pellet was suspended in 25 mL of lysis buffer containing 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0 (4 °C) and 1 M NaCl. After the addition of 10 mg lysozyme from chicken hen egg white (Sigma-Aldrich) and 3 mg avidin (Sigma-Aldrich) the cells were disrupted by sonication. 10 µL Protease Arrest (G-Biosciences) was added and the lysate was incubated with 1 unit of DNase I (Thermo Scientific) for 40 min and then centrifuged at 10,000 x g for 30 min at 4 °C. The resulted protein extract was stored overnight at 4 °C before purification. All proteins were purified by a 10 mL Strep-Tactin column (IBA) using an ÄKTA FPLC (GE Healthcare) equilibrated with degassed equilibration buffer containing 100 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 150 mM NaCl and 10 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub> by following manufacturer's protocol (purification of Strep-tag fusion proteins with Strep-Tactin matrices from IBA Lifesciences). The protein extracts were centrifuged at 3500 x g for 20 min at 4 °C before they were loaded onto the column. The elution of the Strep-tagged proteins was carried

out in degassed equilibration buffer containing an additional 2.5 to 5 mM d-desthiobiotin (Sigma-Aldrich). For NpFdx9 protein, we used degassed buffers and oxygen scavenging enzymes, 8 U mL<sup>-1</sup> glucose oxidase (Sigma-Aldrich) and 100 U mL<sup>-1</sup> catalase (Sigma-Aldrich), to have semi-anaerobic conditions during purification procedure. The eluted proteins were concentrated using 10 kDa centrifugal filter units (Merck). The buffer was changed to 50 mM NaCl and 10 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0 by using PD-10 columns (GE Healthcare). The protein concentration was determined using the DC protein assay (Bio-Rad) and the protein BSA (Sigma-Aldrich) served as a standard.

### ***Non-denaturing and denaturing gel electrophoresis***

Protein expression and purification were confirmed by Laemmli SDS-PAGE [33]. 0.8 µg of each protein sample was applied onto Any kD gel (Bio-Rad). As a molecular mass marker, the SDS-PAGE Broad Range Molecular mass standards (Bio-Rad) were used. Gel electrophoresis was performed at 200 V, thereafter the gel was incubated overnight in colloidal Coomassie and subsequently de-stained in demineralized water [14]. Gel documentation was performed on a Chemi Doc XRS (Bio-Rad). The identity of each protein band was confirmed by mass spectrometry (see below). To investigate the multimeric forms of the purified Dps proteins 0.8 µg of NpDps and EcDps and 1.5 µg of BSA (Sigma) was mixed with loading buffer (25 mM NaCl, 30 mM Tris-HCl pH 6.8 (RT), 20 % glycerol and 0.005 % (w/v) bromophenol blue) and applied to an Any kD gel (Bio-Rad). The separation buffer contained 25 mM Tris-HCl and 192 mM glycine (pH 8.0 at 22 °C). According to the manufacturer's guide, the gel possessed an intrinsic pH of 8.45. The applied voltage was set to 100 V for the first 30 sec and subsequently decreased to 40 V for 10 h at 22 °C. The gel was stained and documented as described before for SDS-PAGE.

### ***Sample preparation and mass spectrometry analysis***

NpFdx, NpDps, and EcDps proteins were reduced, alkylated and in-gel digested by trypsin according to a standard operating procedure [55]. Thereafter the samples were dried and dissolved in 15 µL of 0.1% formic acid. The peptides were separated in reversed-phase on a C18-column and electrosprayed on-line to Q Exactive Plus mass spectrometer (Thermo Finnigan). Tandem mass spectrometry was performed applying higher-energy C-trap dissociation. The data were analyzed by using the Sequest algorithm embedded in Proteome Discoverer 1.4 (Thermo Fisher Scientific) towards a FASTA database containing proteins from *N. punctiforme* ATCC 29133 and *E. coli*, downloaded from the SwissProt database. The search criteria for protein identification were set to at least two matching peptides of 95% confidence level per protein. Protein sequences for NpFdx1, NpFdx9, NpFdxH, NpDps4, and NpDps5 were received from the Cyanobase database



(<http://genome.microbedb.jp/cyanobase/>) [26] for *N. punctiforme* and NCBI protein databases (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/protein/>) for *E. coli*. Protein sequences were aligned using Clustal Omega [28, 53].

### ***Electrophoretic mobility shift assay (EMSA)***

Prior to gel electrophoresis, 125 ng of pSB1A3 plasmid DNA (2.5 kbp) was mixed with 1 µg of each of the purified proteins at pH 6.0 and pH 7.0 in 5 µL MES and Bis-Tris buffer systems (50 mM NaCl and 100 mM buffer), respectively. Subsequently, after a 15 min incubation step at 22 °C, 1 µL of 6 x loading buffer (60 % (v/v) glycerol, 50 mM NaCl and 0.1 % (w/v) bromophenol blue) was added. The reaction volume was applied to a 1 % (w/v) agarose gel (50 mM NaCl and 10 mM of MES or Bis-Tris buffer). Gel electrophoresis was performed at a voltage of 30 V for 45 min at 22 °C. The gels were stained in thiazole orange containing MES running buffer for 1 h under shaking in darkness. After two washing steps with demineralized water, documentation was performed on a Chemi Doc XRS (Bio-Rad). 1 µg of *E. coli* Dps, EcDps, and 1 µg bovine serum albumin (BSA) (Sigma) served as positive and negative controls respectively.

### ***Dynamic light scattering (DLS)***

Purified NpDps and EcDps proteins were diluted to a concentration between 70 to 100 µg mL<sup>-1</sup> into 50 mM NaCl and 100 mM buffer containing HEPES (pH 3.0), acetate (pH 5.0), succinate (pH 6.0), phosphate (pH 7.0), Tris (pH 8.0) and Bis-Tris propane (pH 9.0). All buffer components were individually filtered (0.45 µm Millipore filter HAWP-AO, Merck) before mixing. Prior to DLS analysis, all samples were centrifuged at 13,000x g for 5 min at 22 °C. DLS analysis was performed at 173 ° (backscattering) on a Zetasizer Nano instrument (Malvern) using 1 cm path length polystyrene cuvettes (VWR). Experiments were performed at 25 °C. At each pH, 5 to 13 data sets (each 100 sec in duration) were collected for each protein. The hydrodynamic diameter of each protein species was calculated based on the mean from each dataset (number related size distribution). For background measurements, five datasets (each 100 sec in duration) were collected for solutions at each pH without protein.

### ***UV-visible spectrophotometry and EPR spectroscopy of NpFdx proteins***

UV-visible spectra of NpFdx1, NpFdxH, and NpFdx9 in their as-isolated state were measured either in 1 mL quartz cuvettes or in EPR quartz tubes (0.3 cm path length) in a Varian Cary 50 Bio UV-visible spectrophotometer. Samples were diluted with 100 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0 + 150 mM NaCl buffer when necessary so as to keep Abs < 1 for relevant features in the visible region of the spectra. For electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) spectroscopy, 150 - 200 µL of each sample in

the as-isolated state was introduced in EPR quartz tubes suitable for X-band experiments. The tubes were then flushed with argon, capped with rubber septa, and frozen and kept in liquid nitrogen (77 K) storage until measurement. Spectra were acquired at cryogenic temperatures ( $T = 7$  to  $20$  K) using liquid helium as a coolant in a Bruker ELEXYS E500 spectrometer using an ER049X SuperX microwave bridge, and a Bruker SHQ4122 cavity, equipped with an Oxford Instruments continuous flow cryostat, and using an ITC 503 temperature controller (Oxford Instruments). To analyze the reduced state of iron-sulfur clusters in all ferredoxins, sodium dithionite (Sigma-Aldrich) was added to each EPR sample to a final concentration of  $5$  mM (from a freshly-prepared anaerobic  $100$  mM stock solution in  $100$  mM Tris-HCl pH  $8.0$  +  $150$  mM NaCl buffer). After incubation at room temperature ( $20$  °C) for  $30$  min, samples were re-frozen and new spectra were acquired. Spin quantification was performed based on the concentration of protein as calculated from UV-visible spectra, assuming  $\epsilon_{420} = 9500$  M<sup>-1</sup>cm<sup>-1</sup> for both NpFdx1 ( $100$  μM) and FdxH ( $185$  μM) and  $\epsilon_{420} = 15000$  M<sup>-1</sup>cm<sup>-1</sup> for Fdx9 ( $33$  μM), and using  $1$  mM CuSO<sub>4</sub> in  $10$  mM HCl as spin standard. Spectra acquisition and analyses were performed using the Xepr software package (Bruker).

### ***Protein labeling and sample preparation***

In Fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) experiments, lysines of NpDps and cysteines of NpFdx proteins were labeled with the fluorophore Atto550 ( $\lambda_{ex}$   $544$  nm;  $\lambda_{em}$   $576$  nm) by following the protocol provided by the manufacturer (Atto-Tec) respectively. For DNA binding experiments, linear DNA was used in all experiments. In Fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET) experiments, lysines were labeled with donor Atto550 and cysteines were labeled with acceptor Atto647N ( $\lambda_{ex}$   $644$  nm;  $\lambda_{em}$   $661$  nm) in NpDps and NpFdx proteins, respectively. In all cases, excess fluorophore was added to the aqueous protein solution and left for  $8$  h at  $4$  °C. The labeled protein was subsequently purified using size exclusion chromatography on a Sephadex™ G-25 Medium column (GE Healthcare, UK). To remove excess free dyes from the labeled proteins and also avoid hydrolysis of an extra fluorophore, the samples were dialyzed (3k membrane) two times,  $4$  h of incubation in each time at  $4$  °C. The freshly prepared complexes were immediately used for FCS and FRET experiments. For DNA and NpDps proteins interaction study, linear dsDNA ( $\sim 0.25$  kbp,  $500$  nM) was incubated  $30$  min at  $22$  °C with  $50$  nM of the each purified and labelled NpDps using  $50$  mM Bis-Tris and HEPES buffer systems supplemented with  $150$  mM NaCl at pH  $6.0$  and pH  $8.0$  respectively. In the case of FCS experiments considering NpFdxs interactions with NpDps,  $100$  nM of each labeled NpFdxs were mixed with  $500$  nM of each unlabeled NpDps for  $2$  h at pH  $6.0$  and  $8.0$ . In the case of FRET experiments,  $10$  nM of each labeled NpDps were mixed with  $50$  nM of each labeled NpFdxs using  $50$  mM Bis-Tris buffer supplemented with  $150$  mM NaCl at pH  $6.0$ .

In all cases, we added 0.1% Tween-20 (Sigma) to the samples in order to diminish surface interactions with the glass coverslip.

### ***Fluorescence correlation spectroscopy***

FCS experiments were carried out with a custom-built confocal fluorescence microscope with a Zeiss C-Apochromat  $40 \times 1.2\text{NA}$  H<sub>2</sub>O-immersion objective at 22°C. The fluorescence intensity temporal fluctuations were analyzed with a hardware correlator (Flex02-12D/C correlator). All the experimental data were fitted in considering a single species and free Brownian 3D diffusion in the case of a Gaussian molecular detection efficiency.

$$g(\tau) = 1 + \frac{1}{N} \left(1 - \frac{B}{F}\right)^2 \cdot \left(1 + n_T \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{\tau}{\tau_T}\right)\right) \cdot \frac{1}{\left(1 + \frac{\tau}{\tau_d}\right) \sqrt{1 + S^2 \left(\frac{\tau}{\tau_d}\right)^2}} \quad (1)$$

where  $N$  is the average number of molecules in the focal volume,  $F$  is the total fluorescence signal,  $B$  is the background noise,  $n_T$  is the amplitude of the dark state population,  $\tau_T$  is the dark state blinking time,  $\tau_d$  is the mean diffusion time and  $S$  is the ratio of transversal to axial dimensions of the analysis volume. The molecular diffusion coefficient,  $D$  and hydrodynamic radius,  $R_H$  were calculated as previously as described in detail [42]. The confocal volume was defined by using the 30  $\mu\text{m}$  confocal pinhole conjugated to the sample plane whose transversal waist  $w_{xy}$  was calibrated to 285 nm using the known diffusion coefficient of Alexa 647 in pure water ( $3.1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$  at 22 °C) and known hydrodynamic radius of 0.7 nm in pure water.

### ***Fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET)***

FRET detection was performed on a confocal inverted microscope with a Zeiss C-Apochromat  $63 \times 1.2\text{NA}$  water-immersion objective, and an iChrome-TVIS laser (Toptica GmbH) as an exciting source operating at 550 nm. The excitation power at the diffraction-limited spot was set to 20  $\mu\text{W}$  for all experimental conditions. Filtering the laser excitation was achieved by a set of two band-pass filters (Chroma ET525/70M and Semrock FF01-550/88). Dichroic mirrors (Chroma ZT594RDC and ZT633RDC) separate the donor and acceptor fluorescence light. The photodiode signal was recorded by a fast time-correlated single photon counting module (Hydraharp400, Picoquant GmbH) in time-tagged time-resolved (TTTR) mode. The detection was performed by two avalanche photodiodes (Micro Photon Devices MPD-5CTC with 50  $\mu\text{m}$  active surface) with  $620 \pm 20 \text{ nm}$  (Chroma ET605/70M and ET632/60M) and  $670 \pm 20 \text{ nm}$  (Semrock FF01-676/37) fluorescence

band-pass filters for the donor and acceptor channels respectively. All fluorescence bursts above the background noise were recorded separately by the acceptor channel and donor channel. As a part of calibration, we took into consideration differences in the fluorescence detection efficiencies ( $\eta_A$  and  $\eta_D$ ), direct excitation of the acceptor by the laser light ( $n_A^{de}$ ), donor emission crosstalk into the acceptor channel ( $\alpha$ ) and quantum yields of fluorophores ( $\varphi_A$  and  $\varphi_D$ ). Symphotime 64 (Picoquant GmbH) software was used to compute the FRET efficiency according to the formula below:

$$E = \frac{n_A - \alpha n_D - n_A^{de}}{n_A - \alpha n_D - n_A^{de} + \gamma n_D} \quad (2)$$

where  $\gamma = \eta_A \varphi_A / \eta_D \varphi_D$  accounts for the differences in quantum yields ( $\varphi_A$  and  $\varphi_D$ ) and fluorescence detection efficiencies ( $\eta_A$  and  $\eta_D$ ) between the acceptor and donor.

We estimate  $\gamma = 1.3$ , and  $\alpha = 0.16$  for the current setup. The Förster distance between the selected FRET pair is 62.6 Å.

## Results

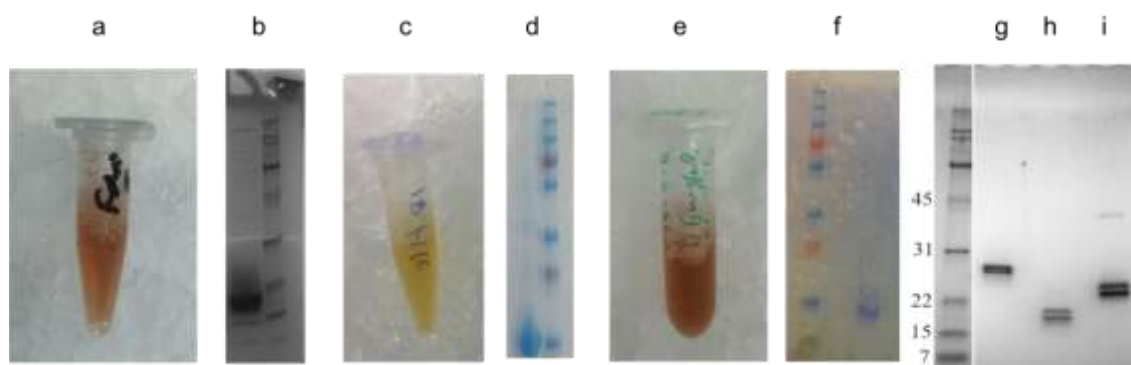
### *Screening for ferredoxin candidates in Nostoc punctiforme*

To identify ferredoxin (NpFdxs) candidates to be used in the NpDps-Fdx interaction studies, we conducted *in silico* analyses of all annotated Fdxs in *N. punctiforme* (Table S1, Figs. S1 and S2). The Fdx, PaBfd from *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (Figs. S1 and S2) was chosen as a template for the investigation, since this protein has shown to interact with a Bfr [24], and was also suggested to be involved in iron reduction and release from the Bfr. The phylogenetic study revealed one clade of [2Fe-2S]-cluster Fdxs, consisting of PaBfd and six NpFdxs, and one clade consisting of seven [4Fe-4S]-cluster NpFdxs (Figs. S1 and S2). Among these, we proceeded with (i) NpFdx1, a homologue of a well-studied Fdx involved in photosynthesis in the cyanobacterium *Synechocystis* PCC 6803 [18], (ii) NpFdxH, which homologue in *Anabaena variabilis* is heterocyst-specific [52], and (iii) NpFdx9 (Npun\_F4770), which homologue in *Synechocystis* PCC 6803 is involved in oxidative and metal stress [18]. As the [Fe-S] cluster unit of the Fdx protein determines its cellular activities [11], we selected both [2Fe-2S] and [4Fe-4S] center-containing ferredoxins for the studies of interaction with NpDps4 and NpDps5.

### *Purification and SDS-PAGE analysis of NpDps and NpFdx proteins*

All NpDps and NpFdx proteins, except NpFdx9, which contains the O<sub>2</sub>-sensitive [4Fe-4S] cluster, were purified using aerobic conditions. For NpFdx9 purification, we used partial anaerobic

conditions, with de-gassed buffers, containing oxygen-scavenging enzymes. The purity of the proteins NpFdx1, NpFdx9, NpFdxH, NpDps4, and NpDps5, were analyzed by SDS-PAGE (Fig. 1). This analysis resulted in protein bands corresponding approximately to the theoretical sizes of the proteins including the attached Strep(II)- tag (Fig 1). Mass spectrometry (MS) analysis of NpFdx protein bands confirmed their identity as respective NpFdx protein. For NpDps proteins, a 22 kDa protein size band was observed for NpDps4 (Fig. 1g) and two ~ 20 kDa bands for NpDps5 (Fig. 1h). All protein bands were analyzed and confirmed by MS. The origin of the double band pattern for NpDps5 is unknown. For EcDps, two strong protein size bands at ~ 22 kDa and a faint 37 kDa protein size band were observed (Fig. 1i). MS analysis identified all three bands as EcDps sequences and a similar band pattern has been observed earlier in SDS-PAGE [51]. Schmidt [51] identified the double band pattern as the results of N-terminal digestion. The EcDps protein band of 37 kDa might be a Dps-dimer as it was also identified by MS to be EcDps.



**Figure 1.** SDS-PAGE analysis of the recombinantly expressed and purified NpFdx, NpDps and EcDps. The calculated molecular mass of the proteins includes the added 2-alanine linker and Strep(II)-tag. The red colored ([2Fe-2S] cluster) NpFdx1 (a), and NpFdxH (e), and orange colored ([4Fe-4S] cluster) NpFdx9 (c) are shown. Panels b, d and f are showing protein bands of NpFdx1, NpFdx7, and NpFdx9 with calculated molecular sizes of 11.8 kDa, 12 kDa and 15.8 kDa respectively. Panels g, h and i are showing protein bands of NpDps4, NpDps5 and EcDps with calculated molecular sizes of 22.0 kDa, 17.7 kDa and 19.9 kDa respectively. SDS-PAGE Broad Range Molecular weight standards (Bio-Rad) were used as molecular mass markers. Gels were stained with colloidal Coomassie dye. 1  $\mu$ g of each of the purified proteins was loaded on a SDS-PAGE gel. The identities of the protein within each protein band were confirmed by mass spectrometry.

### ***Spectroscopic characterization of NpFdxs***

To ensure that the isolated NpFdx contained intact iron-sulfur clusters, and thus may act as electron donors to the NpDps, the number of iron and sulfur atoms of the iron-sulfur centers in the purified NpFdx samples were analyzed by UV-visible absorption spectroscopy in their as-isolated states. Furthermore, due to the lack of biochemical data about the NpFdx, this examination was also

conducted to verify the annotations of Fe-S clusters for NpFdx1, NpFdx9, and NpFdxH. Even though these Fdxs are annotated as [2Fe-2S] or [4Fe-4S] proteins, there have not been any experimental evidence established so far. This novel spectral information was crucial to proceed further with the biochemical and biophysical experiments. NpFdx1 exhibited well-defined absorption bands in the near-UV and visible regions with maxima at 277, 331, 421 and 464 nm (Fig. S6b, upper panel). NpFdxH showed a very similar spectrum, with maxima at 278, 334, 422 and 469 nm (Fig. S6b, middle panel). These spectral characteristics arise from ligand-to-metal charge transfer bands that are typical for [2Fe-2S] centers in the oxidized state [57]. In contrast, NpFdx9 presented broader absorption bands around the 320 and 420 nm region characteristic of proteins containing [3Fe-4S] and/or [4Fe-4S] centers (Fig. S6b, lower panel) [57]. In order to know the state of intact and functional features of [Fe-S] centers in the purified NpFdx proteins, EPR spectroscopy studies were conducted in their as-isolated, and chemically reduced states, using continuous wave X-band electron paramagnetic resonance at cryogenic temperatures. In its as-isolated state, no resonances were visible for NpFdx1 (not shown) between  $T = 11$  K and  $T = 20$  K; this result is consistent with the presence of [2Fe-2S] centers in the oxidized state. Upon one-electron reduction, a low-spin signal ( $S=1/2$ ) was clearly detectable at  $T = 15$  K (Fig. S6a, upper panel). The spectrum presented a rhombic-shaped signal with field components at  $g_x = 1.90$ ,  $g_y = 1.97$  and  $g_z = 2.06$ , and is characteristic for reduced [2Fe-2S] centers [58]. Spin quantification yielded 0.93 spin/metal center, very close to the expected 1 spin/center. The same analysis was applied to NpFdxH. In the as-isolated state, NpFdxH did not show any signals in EPR spectroscopy (not shown), but upon reduction, a low-spin signal ( $S = 1/2$ ), was clearly detectable at  $T = 15$  K (Fig. S6a, middle panel). The spectrum shows field components at  $g_x = 1.92$ ,  $g_y = 1.96$  and  $g_z = 2.05$ ; relaxation properties (not shown) are consistent with the presence of [2Fe-2S] centers. Spin quantification yielded 0.82 spin/metal center, which is slightly lower than NpFdx1; the difference might be due to incomplete reduction. In its as-isolated state. NpFdx9 exhibited a narrow signal centered at around  $g = 2.02$  at  $T = 7$  K (Fig. S6a, lower panel). Temperature and applied microwave power saturation behavior (not shown), as well as signal shape and field position, are characteristic of a low-spin,  $S = 1/2$  [3Fe-4S] cluster in the oxidized state; [4Fe-4S] centers are EPR-silent ( $S = 0$ ) in the oxidized state [57]. Spectra acquired after reduction show the presence of mixed low-spin,  $S = 1/2$  species at  $T = 11$  K characteristic of [4Fe-4S] centers (Fig. S6A, lower panel) [57]. The heterogeneity of the spectrum suggests the presence of mixed populations of protein presenting different spin distributions. Nevertheless, resonance shape and field positions, as well as temperature and applied microwave power saturation (not shown), indicate that the signals arise from magnetically uncoupled [4Fe-4S] centers. Spin quantification in NpFdx9 allowed us to estimate that most (0.80 spin/metal center) of

EPR-detectable iron-sulfur centers were [4Fe-4S] centers, with a minor population (~20%) being [3Fe-4S] centers. The presence of [3Fe-4S] centers is most likely due to the fact that the protein was purified in semi-anaerobic conditions, which can lead to the (reversible) loss of one iron.

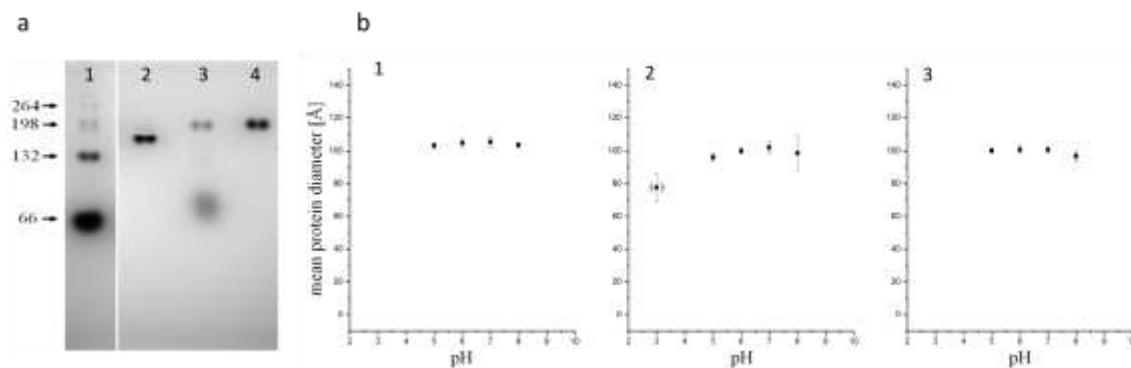
### ***Multimerization properties of NpDps proteins***

The iron storage ability of Dps proteins is dependent on the oligomerization state of the protein complex. Therefore, we determined the state of the purified NpDps4 and NpDps5, under the different pH conditions that were used in the NpDps-NpFdx interaction investigations.

To find the native multimeric sizes of the NpDps proteins, we used four different strategies (i) non-denaturing polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE), (ii) size exclusion chromatography (iii) dynamic light scattering (DLS) and (iv) fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS). Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 showed multimeric protein complexes when analyzed with non-denaturing PAGE at an approximate pH of 8.0 (Fig. 2a). Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 proteins formed large protein complexes, similar in sizes to the control protein EcDps that shows one clear band on the gel corresponding to the dodecameric form of the protein. NpDps5 also showed a band corresponding to a protein complex of lower mass. The approximate molecular masses of each NpDps protein were based on using the different multimeric forms of bovine serum albumin (BSA) as marker proteins [21], (Fig. 2a). To investigate the oligomeric forms and stability of NpDps4 and NpDps5, we performed DLS experiments under different pH conditions, ranging from pH 3.0 to pH 9.0 (Fig. 2b). EcDps served as a control protein to indicate the size of a Dps dodecamer, which has been earlier reported to be ~101 Å in hydrodynamic diameter by DLS analysis [25]. The monomeric form of EcDps derived from the crystal structure, possesses a cylindrical shape with its dimensions of about 17 x 60 Å (radius x height) not including the random coil of the N- and C-termini (PDB:1DPS). At a pH range between 5 to 8, NpDps4, NpDps5 and EcDps formed protein species with an average hydrodynamic diameter larger than 99 Å indicating the presence of multimeric protein complexes, presumably dodecamers. It should be noted that the standard error of the multimer of NpDps5 at pH 8.0 is comparatively large and may indicate a partial decomposition. At pH 3.0, NpDps5 was occasionally observed to form a protein species with a hydrodynamic diameter of 78 Å, indicating dissociation to a lower stable multimeric state, and at pH 9.0 no protein species were found for any of the Dps, which may be due to complete protein denaturation. We also determined the overall oligomerization state of NpDps4 and NpDps5 in solution, by using size-exclusion chromatography, at pH 6.0 and 8.0. EcDps was used as a control. NpDps4 showed one well-defined oligomerization state at both pH 6.0 and pH 8.0. NpDps5 on the other hand showed

one high multimeric conformation, but also one lower multimeric state at both pH 6.0 and 8.0 (Fig. S3). The well-characterized *E. coli* Dps showed one high multimeric state at approximately the same retention time as the high multimeric states of both NpDps4 and NpDps5, thus indicating that all these Dps proteins are, in solution, at least partially, in a dodecameric form.

To explore the multimerization states of NpDps4 and NpDps5, the effect of global free diffusion of both NpDps proteins in aqueous solution were measured by FCS. Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 show the monophasic autocorrelation curves with diffusion times of  $780 \pm 20 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 2.11 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) and  $740 \pm 16 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 2.24 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) in aqueous solution at pH 6.0, respectively (Fig. 3c and 3d, Table S2). The calculated hydrodynamic radii of the NpDps4 were  $\approx 10.7 \text{ nm}$  and  $\approx 11 \text{ nm}$  at pH 6.0 and pH 8.0 respectively (Fig. 3e). In sharp contrast, at pH 8.0, NpDps5 showed reduced diffusion times and decreased hydrodynamic radii around  $\approx 5.61 \text{ nm}$  ( $D = 4.04 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) (Table S3) as compared to  $10.1 \text{ nm}$  ( $D = 2.24 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) at pH 6.0 (Fig. 3d and 3f, Table S2). In all the FCS experiments, we considered triplet state populations were less than 10 %.



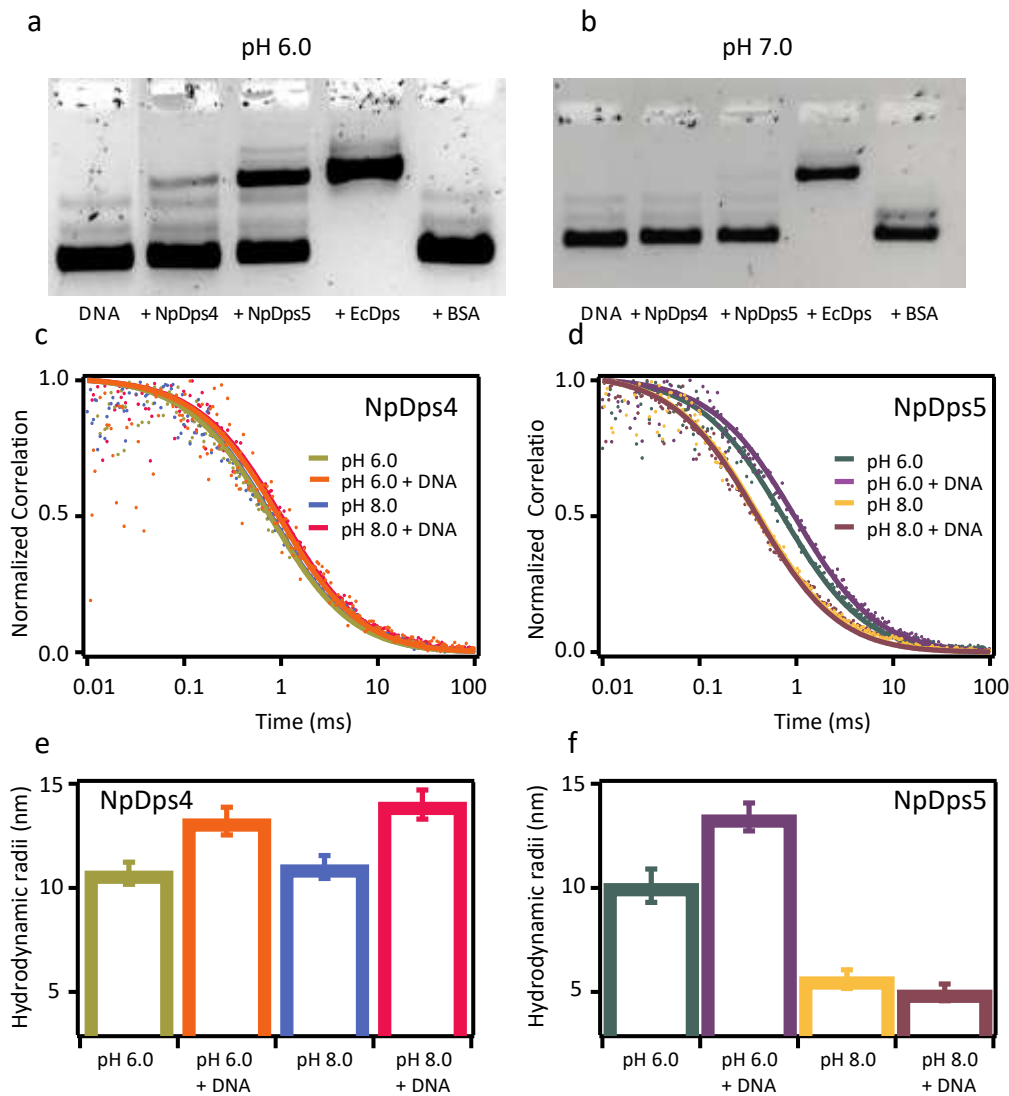
**Figure 2.** Multimeric size of the NpDps4, NpDps5, and EcDps analysed by non-denaturing PAGE and Dynamic light scattering (DLS). Non-denaturing PAGE (a) shows theoretical molecular masses of putative dodecamers were 262 kDa for NpDps4 (a1), 210 kDa for NpDps5 (a2), and 236 kDa (a3) for EcDps. Additionally, the different native forms of bovine serum albumin (BSA) were used for estimating the approximate molecular masses. The pH of the gel was 8.45 and the pH of the running buffer was 8.0. Dynamic light scattering (b) shows the hydrodynamic diameters of NpDps4 (b1), NpDps5 (b2) and EcDps (b3) proteins at different pH. All protein species are displayed as a mean of the average hydrodynamic diameter from each experimental series in (Å) at pH 3.0, 5.0, 6.0, 7.0 and 8.0. Particles with a lower peak occurrence than 1% (number related) are not shown, whereas particles with occurrence between 1% and 10% are shown in brackets. Standard error of the mean particle diameters is given as error bars.

### ***DNA binding properties of NpDps***

Dps are known to mechanically protect the genetic material of some bacteria against oxidative stress, in part due to the ability to bind to DNA [2]. To investigate the DNA binding properties of



the two atypical NpDps, and to resolve if these were dependent on the pH and multimeric state of the NpDps, we conducted both in-solution as well as in-gel studies. In electrophoretic mobility shift assay (EMSA) both NpDps4 and NpDps5 formed dsDNA-Dps complexes at pH 6.0 as indicated by the DNA retardation in the gel (Fig. 3a). It is noticeable that NpDps4 shows weaker dsDNA-binding affinity than NpDps5 at pH 6.0 (Fig. 3a). At pH 7.0 the dsDNA-binding affinity for both NpDps was completely abolished (Fig. 3b). In neither pH condition the complete amount of the dsDNA was bound by the NpDps (unbound dsDNA was still observed) (Fig. 3a and 3b). We further studied the diffusion time of labeled NpDps upon interaction with dsDNA by using FCS, and the results showed that in solution both NpDps4 and NpDps5 show interaction with dsDNA at pH 6.0 (Fig. 3c and 3d). In case of NpDps4, the diffusion times are longer, in the range of 960 – 1020  $\mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 1.71 - 1.62 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) in the presence of dsDNA molecules in comparison with the NpDps4 alone at both pH 6.0 and pH 8.0 respectively (Fig. 3c). The calculated hydrodynamic radii increased from  $\approx 10.1 \text{ nm}$  to  $\approx 13.2 \text{ nm}$  and  $\approx 14.0 \text{ nm}$  when the NpDps4 were incubated with dsDNA at both pH 6.0 and pH 8.0 (Fig. 3e). NpDps5 shows a similar increase in the calculated hydrodynamic radii from  $\approx 10.1 \text{ nm}$  to  $\approx 13.4 \text{ nm}$  in the presence of dsDNA at pH 6.0 (Fig. 3f). On another hand, NpDps5 showed a similar range of diffusion times, and corresponding hydrodynamic radii ranges from  $\approx 5.6 \text{ nm}$  to  $\approx 4.5 \text{ nm}$  in the presence (respectively absence) of dsDNA at pH 8.0 (Fig. 3f). Thus, the FCS results clearly supported the in-gel (EMSA) results and showed that both NpDps4 and NpDps5 interact with DNA.



**Figure 3.** DNA binding properties of fluorescence labeled NpDps4, NpDps5 and unlabeled EcDps at different pH using EMSA and FCS methods. EMSA analysis of the DNA binding properties of the NpDps proteins at pH 6.0 (a) and pH 7.0 (b). 125 ng of plasmid DNA (pSB1A3 vector) was incubated with 1  $\mu$ g of NpDps protein material and separated on an agarose gel (1 %). EcDps and BSA served as positive and negative controls respectively. Plasmid DNA is shown in lane “DNA”. Thiazole orange staining was performed after gel electrophoresis for DNA detection. Normalized FCS correlation traces of NpDps4 (c), NpDps5 (d) and corresponding apparent hydrodynamic radii (e & f) obtained in the absence or presence of unlabeled dsDNA at pH 6.0 and at pH 8.0 in aqueous solution. Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 proteins show the monophasic autocorrelation curves.

### *NpDps-NpFdx interactions*

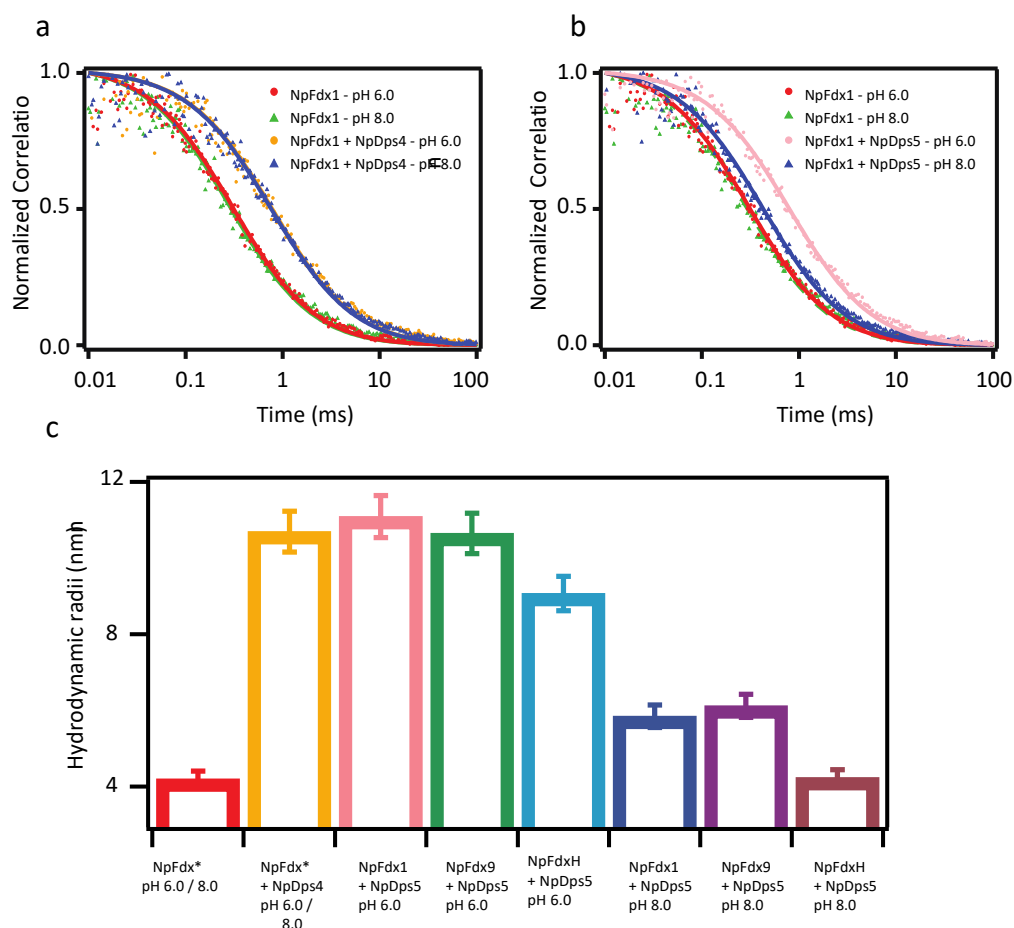
To investigate the possible interactions between NpDps and NpFdx proteins, and how this interaction may change depending on pH, FCS studies were conducted. To determine the hydrodynamic radii of NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH, and how the corresponding hydrodynamic

radii modulate upon interaction with NpDps, we measured the diffusion times of labeled NpFdx with or without excessive amounts of NpDps4 or NpDps5 proteins. All free labeled NpFdx proteins show similar diffusion times of  $300 \pm 20 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 5.4 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) at both pH 6.0 (Fig. S4) and pH 8.0 (data not shown). In the presence of NpDps4, all the NpFdx proteins showed increased diffusion time of  $760 \pm 30 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 2.1 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ), as compared to only the isolated NpFdxs, at both pH 6.0 and 8.0 as exemplified for NpFdx1 (Fig. 4a). The calculated hydrodynamic radii result from the FCS data, summarizes that NpDps4 induce a similar noticeable change in hydrodynamic radii of NpFdx1, NpFdx9, and NpFdxH upon interactions at both pH 6.0 and 8.0 (Fig. 4c and S5). In the presence of NpDps5, NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH showed increased diffusion times of  $810 \pm 20 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 2.0 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ),  $780 \pm 20 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 2.1 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) and  $660 \pm 20 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 2.4 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) respectively, as compared to only the isolated NpFdxs (Fig. S5). The calculated hydrodynamic radii of NpDps5 in interaction with NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH were 11.1 nm, 10.6 nm, and 9.0 nm at pH 6.0 (Fig. 4c, Fig. S5, and Table S2). At pH 8.0, NpFdx1, NpFdx9, and NpFdxH in the presence of NpDps5 show diffusion times of  $430 \pm 30 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 3.8 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ),  $450 \pm 20 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 3.7 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) and  $309 \pm 10 \mu\text{s}$  ( $D = 5.3 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm}^2 \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ ) (Fig. S5). The calculated hydrodynamic radii of NpDps5 in interaction with NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH at pH 8.0 were 5.8 nm, 6.1 nm, and 4.2 nm respectively (Fig. 4c, Fig. S5, and Table S3) indicating weak interactions at pH 8.0.

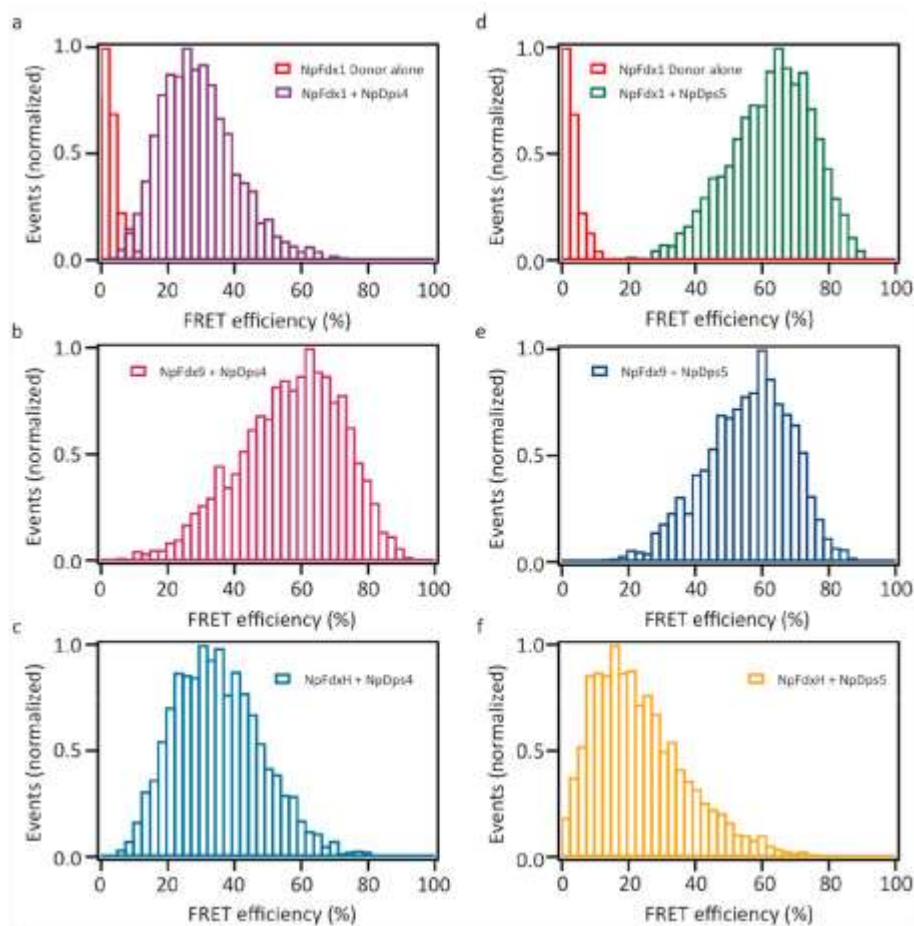
Based on the present data, we may conclude that under these experimental conditions both the NpDps4 and NpDps5 were multimers, putative dodecamers, at pH 6.0. At this pH similar hydrodynamic radii were identified for NpFdx1 and NpFdx9 upon interactions with both NpDps4 and NpDps5. These results were similar when the labeled NpFdx protein concentrations were kept at a constant concentration of 100 nM and a high concentration of unlabelled NpDps (2  $\mu\text{M}$ ) were added. Thus, the results indicate that even at high concentrations of proteins, it seems very likely, that the formed NpDps multimeric complexes stay in a stable soluble multimeric form in aqueous solution at pH 6.0. At more basic conditions NpDps5 does not occur to be a stable dodecamer, which is reflected in the determined lower hydrodynamic radii of all NpFdx upon interaction with NpDps5 at pH 8.0 in comparison with at pH 6.0 (Fig. 4c and Fig. S5).

To determine possible interactions of NpFdxs and NpDps we used a confocal single molecule fluorescence resonance energy transfer strategy (FRET). By this method we determined if two fluorophores, in this case labeled NpFdxs and labeled NpDps are within a certain distance of each other. FRET histograms of the labeled NpFdxs in the presence or absence of labeled NpDps, at pH 6.0, are summarized in Figure 5. A pH of 6 was used to ensure the NpDps were in their multimeric

states. For all of the only donor labeled NpFdxs that are freely diffusing in solution only one peak was observed in the energy transfer efficiency ( $E$ ) histograms, as exemplified for NpFdx1 (Fig. 5a). In the following description of the results, the normalized FRET values were interpreted, as a binding efficiency between NpDps and NpFdx proteins, would be visible as a change of FRET value. NpFdx1-NpDps4 interaction gave an maxima  $E \sim 25\%$  (Fig. 5a). NpFdxH-NpDps4 interaction shows a similar  $E \sim 31\%$  (Fig. 5c), while the NpFdx9-NpDps4 interaction shows a higher energy transfer efficiency maxima  $E \sim 58\%$  (Fig. 5b). Thus, indicating that the average distance between the labeled NpDps4 and labeled NpFdx9 are smaller as compared to the average distance between NpDps4 and NpFdx1 or NpFdxH. The interaction of NpDps5 as compared to the interaction of NpDps4 with the three NpFdx showed a different pattern of energy transfer efficiency maxima. The interaction of NpDps5 with NpFdx1 and NpFdx9 gave similar  $E$  of  $\sim 63\%$  and  $\sim 56\%$ , respectively (Fig. 5d and 5e), while the NpDps5-FdxH interaction shows a clear left-shifted peak at  $E \sim 15\%$  (Fig. 5f), which suggests that the average distance between NpDps5 and NpFdxH are longer as compared to the average distance between NpFdx1/NpFdx9 and NpDps5.



**Figure 4.** FCS data on the labeled NpFdxs in concern together with excess amounts of NpDps4 and NpDps5 in aqueous solution. Normalized FCS correlation traces of NpFdx1 in the presence of NpDps4 (a) and in the presence of NpDps5 (b) at pH 6.0 and 8.0 in aqueous solution. Deduced hydrodynamic radii obtained for ferredoxin proteins (NpFdx\*) in the absence or presence of NpDps4 and NpDps5 at pH 6.0 and 8.0 (c). Here, NpFdx\* represents NpFdx1 / NpFdx9 / NpFdxH. For details see supporting figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Inter-FRET efficiency histograms of NpFdx variants and NpDps variants. The higher value in FRET histogram indicates the higher degree of compactness between proteins. Intermolecular FRET of NpFdx1-NpDps4 complex (a), NpFdx9-NpDps4 complex (b), NpFdxH-NpDps4 complex (c), NpFdx1-NpDps5 complex (d), NpFdx9-NpDps5 complex (e), and NpFdxH-NpDps4 complex (f) in comparison with NpFdx1 donor alone. In FRET histograms corresponding NpFdx proteins labeled with only donor fluorophore was used as a reference. Gaussian distributions were used to fit the data (data not shown). All experiments were carried out at 21 °C at pH 6.0.

## Discussion

Here we continue our exploration of ferritin-like proteins in *N. punctiforme*, which is a bacterium equipped with an unusually complex set of five Dps proteins (NpDps1 – 5). In our earlier studies, NpDps1 - 3 were shown to cluster together with Dps proteins, such as the Dps family prototype of *Escherichia coli*, and thus classified as canonical Dps proteins. On the other hand, NpDps4 were clustered with atypical Dps, and NpDps5 with Bfrs, and were therefore classified as non-canonical Dps proteins [31, 23]. Our working hypothesis is that each NpDps protein has a specific physiological role, and insights into their biochemical properties will help to understand the multilayered network of iron homeostasis and oxidative stress tolerance in *N. punctiforme*. In this study we hypothesized that NpFdx interact with the two atypical Dps proteins in *N. punctiforme*, and therefore may mediate electron transfer for reduction and release of the stored iron.

We also aimed at describing NpDps4 and NpDps5 in terms of their protein multimerization, pH stability and their possible interaction with ferredoxins and DNA. Indeed, the results obtained from the interaction studies of NpDps and NpFdxs show for the first time that Dps proteins can interact with Fdxs. Although the physiological relevance of the NpDps-NpFdx interaction is hard to predict, our results show that the interactions are dependent on pH, state of multimerization of the Dps and on the specific NpDps-NpFdx pair.

#### ***NpDps4 and NpDps5 form dodecameric structures***

For the Dps to be able to store iron within the cell it needs to be in its multimeric form under physiological conditions. Certainly, both NpDps4 and NpDps5 form high states of multimeric complexes, presumably dodecamers under physiological pH. Of the two, NpDps4 was found to be more stable within a wider range of pH conditions. The level of multimerization was similar for the two NpDps which suggest that even if NpDps5 is structural similar to a Bfr [23] it forms a dodecameric protein as for typical Dps, and not a 24-meric protein complex as for typical Bfr.

DLS results showed that NpDps4 and NpDps5 have individual optimal pH ranges for stability and multimerization in solution. Both NpDps form high molecular complexes between pH 5.0 to 8.0, whereas at pH 3.0 and pH 9.0 they are likely completely denatured (Fig. 2b). Size exclusion chromatography (Fig. S3) as well as FCS results supported these observations and confirmed that NpDps4 and EcDps were stable in their multimeric states at pH 6.0 and at pH 8.0, while NpDps5 appeared in higher and lower multimeric states at pH 6.0 and at pH 8.0 respectively. The dissociation at alkaline conditions does not seem to be due to total degradation, since predominant multimeric states were identified for both NpDps with all these complementary methods for determination of size. Therefore, we suggest that the dissociation of the multimeric form is pH-dependent. In general, the dodecameric shape of Dps proteins has been shown to be important for DNA binding, iron

incorporation, and circumventing the Fenton reaction [16]. The realization of the individual pH dependences of the dodecameric structures was used to design the interactions studies and to interpret the results of these studies.

### ***NpDps4 and NpDps5 show interaction with DNA***

We found that both NpDps4 and NpDps5 interact with DNA in a pH dependent fashion. Actually, this was a surprising result since NpDps5 is structurally similar to Bfr [23] a group of ferritin-like proteins which is not known to bind DNA.

Both NpDps4 and NpDps5 interacted with DNA at pH 6.0 in the gel-based EMSA experiments, but did not show binding at pH 7.0. In contrast the FCS data show NpDps specific pH dependent DNA binding. NpDps4 interacts with DNA at both pH 6.0 and at pH 8.0 while NpDps5 only show complex formation at pH 6.0. It may be that the electrostatic interaction, which is the common basis for DNA and Dps interaction [15], is impeded by the external electrical field that is applied during EMSA, a method that has to be regarded as more invasive as compared to FCS. The pattern for NpDps5-DNA interaction seen in the FCS experiments correlates with the loss of dodecameric structure of NpDps5 at pH 8.0 indicating the importance of the dodecamer structure for DNA-binding, at least *in vitro*.

The general mechanism of DNA binding by Dps proteins was provided for *E. coli* Dps, which carries three lysine residues at its N-terminus, that can be positively charged under physiological pH, and there upon forms large Dps-DNA complexes *in vitro* [15]. NpDps4 and NpDps5 exhibit a weaker DNA binding affinity as compared to the control EcDps (Fig. 3a, b). The poor NpDps4-DNA interaction is not easily explained by electrostatic properties, but the low number of positively charged amino acids in its terminal tail may be of significance (one arginine in the N-, one lysine at the C-terminus). Since both N- and C-termini are naturally short in NpDps5, the protein surface charges might be more relevant for NpDps5-DNA complex formation, as proposed for the Dps from *Helicobacter pylori* [17]. This biochemical property is dependent on pH that will modulate the overall protonation of the protein, which could lead to gain or loss of interaction [16]. While our study does not focus on this hypothesis, it is nevertheless an interesting avenue to pursue in a future study.

The long-standing hypothesis that DNA-binding would physically protect DNA from hydroxyl radicals (OH $\cdot$ ), a ROS that is produced by the Fenton reaction, appears to be rather indefensible since many Dps proteins have been identified to protect DNA from this reaction without the capability to interact with DNA [6]. Therefore, it is likely that DNA binding fulfils other physiological roles such as DNA compaction [20] or physical protection from higher temperatures

[19]. Dynamic state of DNA topology is essential for genome condensation in bacteria and has been studied *in vitro* for the gram-negative prokaryote *E. coli* [15] and the gram-positive *Staphylococcus aureus* [43]. As *N. punctiforme* in total contains five different Dps proteins, of which NpDps2, NpDps3 [31], NpDps4 and NpDps5 can form DNA-Dps complexes, it remains to be shown if any of these DNA-binding capabilities are of physiological relevance.

### ***NpFdx proteins are possible electron donors for NpDps***

NpFdx proteins interact with NpDps4 and NpDps5, suggesting a potential role of these electron transfer proteins in redox activities of NpDps. Homologues of NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH act as electron donors or are involved in various metabolic reactions in microalgae [30, 3, 18]. A homologue of NpFdx1 in *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii*, the photosynthetic ferredoxin, PetF acts as an electron carrier and plays a crucial role in the efficient electron transfer between Photosystem I (PSI) and the [FeFe] hydrogenase HydA1 [61, 62]. FdxH is a heterocyst localized protein and has been shown to function as an electron donor to nitrogenase [9]. FdxH takes electrons from PSI in the light but can also be reduced by ferredoxin:NADPH oxidoreductase in darkness with the NADPH produced in oxidative pentose phosphate pathway [7]. All these electron transfer reactions are essentially based on the interaction of [Fe-S] clusters from the donor (ferredoxin) to the acceptor protein (nitrogenase, PS I, hydrogenase). The [Fe-S] centers of the NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH from *N. punctiforme* were experimentally characterized and found to be consistent with those predicted from their primary protein structures, namely, NpFdx1 and NpFdxH containing [2Fe-2S] and NpFdx9 [4Fe-4S] centers. Previous studies have shown that Fdxs are able to reduce the iron core of Bfr [4], and thus release iron under *in vitro* conditions. In this study we have shown that indeed NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH do interact with NpDps4 and NpDps5 under some of the tested conditions, and the characteristics of the protein interactions are dependent on the Fdx-Dps couple. Based on the present inter-FRET efficiencies one can calculate the distance between the fluorophores between NpFdx and NpDps proteins. NpFdx1 and NpFdxH are more than 70 Å from NpDps4 (Fig. 5) In NpFdx9-NpDps4 complex, this distance is ~ 61 Å (Fig. 5). In formed complexes NpDps5-NpFdx1, NpDps5-NpFdx9 and NpDps5-FdxH, NpFdx proteins show different distances in a range ~ 61 Å to 85 Å to NpDps5. Considering all, one may speculate that each NpFdx and NpDps proteins show unique binding induced modulation upon interaction with each other, which reflects the energy efficiency between the NpFdx donor and NpDps acceptor molecules.

The interaction studies support our hypothesis that NpFdx proteins are involved in iron regulation, probably by reduction of stored iron that could be released to re-enter the metabolism. It should be noted that Bfrs contain a heme group on the 2-fold symmetry axis between two subunits thus



electronically connecting the protein exterior with the inner oxidized iron core. On the contrary the Dps proteins don't contain heme and the routes of electron transfer remain unknown. These electron transfer routes are of crucial importance to understand the role of Dps in cellular iron homeostasis in general, and more specifically for heterocyst metabolism.

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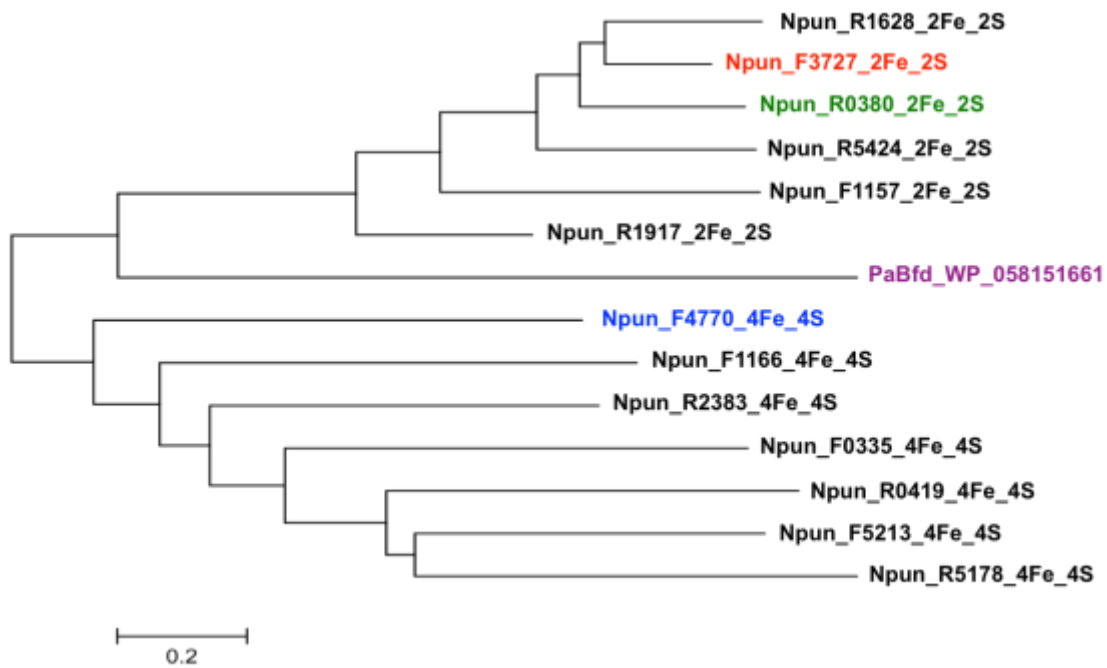
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## Supplementary data



**Figure S1.** An unrooted phylogenetic tree of the [2Fe-2S] and [4Fe-4S] ferredoxins in *N. punctiforme* with a bootstrap support of 100 replicates. Bfd ferredoxin (WP\_058151661.1) from *P. aeruginosa*, NpFdx1 (Npun\_F3727), NpFdxH (Npun\_R0380) and NpFdx9 (Npun\_F4770) are highlighted with purple, red, green and blue colours respectively.

a

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Npun_R5178_4Fe_4S -----M--IELVSHKL-CIN-CNVCVQ--VCPTNV---FESVP----- 29
Npun_F5213_4Fe_4S -----MS--HTVKIYDT-CIG-CTQCVR--ACPTDV---LEMVPWDGCKA-- 36
Npun_R2383_4Fe_4S -----MALINQRID--VPVIVDESKLEKCTACIE--VCPLDV---LAKNP----- 39
Npun_F4770_4Fe_4S MKKRVTLTLPKRAVQ--MPVTVYLAKEFNVAANIIRAQVAPNQIGKLVVLAGDIDQL-- 56
Npun_F0335_4Fe_4S MAQLTGLTFGGKAWTPKFAQEIDKDRSIG-CGRCSVK--VCGYNVLG-LKALNEEGEFVED 56
Npun_F1166_4Fe_4S -----MPHTIVTEVCEG-VADCVD--ACPVAC---IHDGPGKN----- 32
Npun_R0419_4Fe_4S -----MAYKILTSQCIS-CNLCLT--VCPTNAVKVVDGQHWIDPELCT 40
PaBfd_WP_058151661 -----MYVCLCQGVTDNQIRDALIEGCCS--YRDVR----- 29

Npun_R5178_4Fe_4S NQPPAIARQ-----EDCQTCFMCEAYCPADALYVAPQSH--TNVAVNED 71
Npun_F5213_4Fe_4S AQIASSPRT-----EDCVGCKRCETACPTDPLSIR-----VYLG-- 70
Npun_R2383_4Fe_4S ETGKAYMKY-----DECFWFLPCEKECPTNAITVQIP-----FLLR-- 75
Npun_F4770_4Fe_4S DAAIEWMRSRHVNVSYTLGELIAIDEDVCVHCGGLCTGVCPTEALTLHPET---YKLTPTRS 113
Npun_F0335_4Fe_4S EDDEEIERKVMVAVTS-----PENCIGCEACSRICPKNCYTHV-----AVNH- 97
Npun_F1166_4Fe_4S ARGTDWYWID-----FATCIDCGICLQVCPVEGAILAEER-----PELQKT 73
Npun_R0419_4Fe_4S NCVGSIHTVP-----QCKAGCPTCDGCVKQ--PSDYWEGWFANYRNVVAKLTNK 87
PaBfd_WP_058151661 ----EATGVG-----TQCGKACLAKQVVRETLDLQSAQP--VPAFGTT 68
          * *

Npun_R5178_4Fe_4S DLIESGIMGEYRIRILGWGYGRKNNSLDTAHLRQLRQLRPYQS 113
Npun_F5213_4Fe_4S -----AETTRSMGLAY----- 81
Npun_R2383_4Fe_4S -----
Npun_F4770_4Fe_4S RCIVCEQCIPVQAISTNL----- 134
Npun_F0335_4Fe_4S -----
Npun_F1166_4Fe_4S P----- 74
Npun_R0419_4Fe_4S QDYWERWFQYTSQKYSEQLQKRQSQSVGSEA----- 118
PaBfd_WP_058151661 AFVAA----- 73

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b

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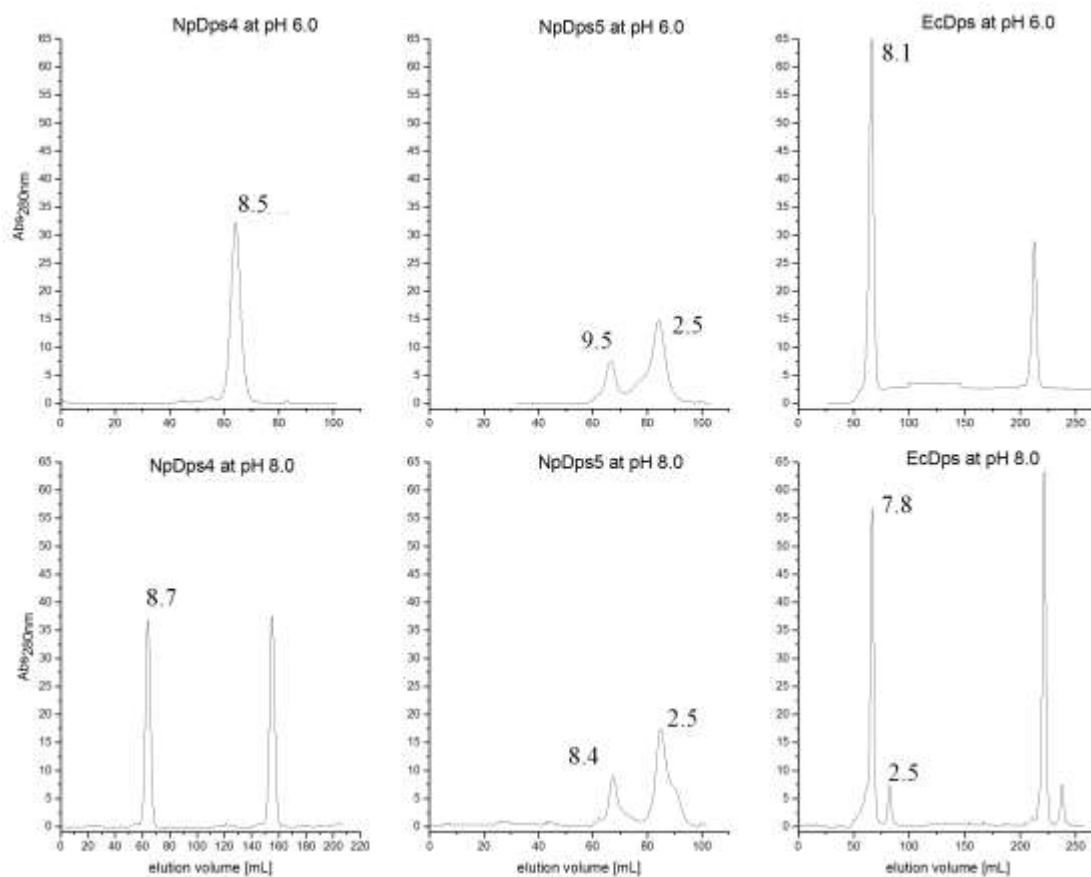
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Npun_F1157_2Fe_2S MSRTYTIKVRDRATGKTHTLKVPEDRYILHTA-EKQGVLPFSCHAGACTACAVRVLSGE 59
Npun_R1917_2Fe_2S MPKTYTVEIDH--QGKIHTLQVPENETILSVA-DAAGLELPSSCNAGVCTTCAGQISQGT 57
PaBfd_WP_058151661 ---MYVCLCQGVTDNQIRDALIEGCCSYRDVR-EATGVGT--QC--GKACLAKQVVRET 52
          *          : :          * * * : :

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Npun_R5424_2Fe_2S VNQSEQKFLRPSEIQAAYVVTCTVYPLSNCTLETHQEVLYKSALYYKPESGKSD---- 113
Npun_F1157_2Fe_2S IYQPEAIGLSPDLRQQGYALLCVSYPRSDLEVEVQDEDEVEYELQFGRYFAKGVKAGLPL 119
Npun_R1917_2Fe_2S VDQTDGMGVSPDLQKQGYVLLGVAKPLSDLKLETEKEDIVYQLQFG----KDK----- 106
PaBfd_WP_058151661 LNDLQSAQFPVPAFGTTAFVAA----- 73
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Npun_F3727_2Fe_2S ---
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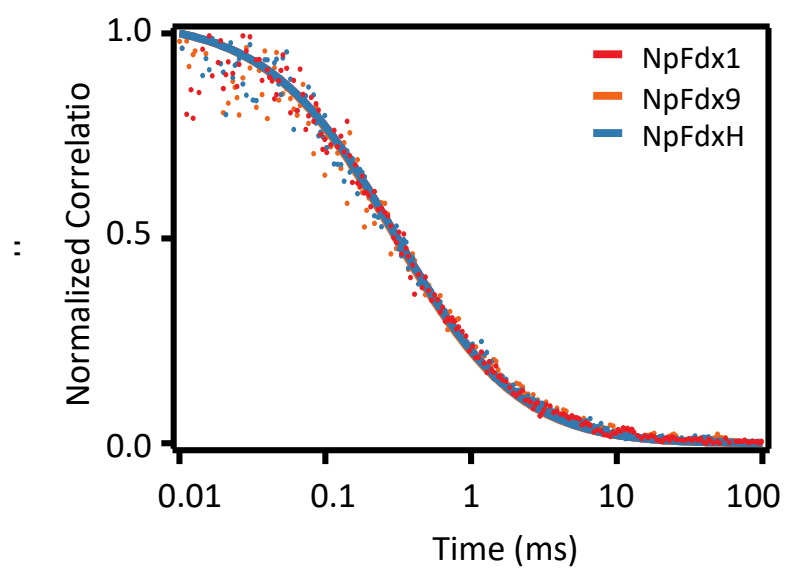
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**Figure S2.** The multiple sequence analysis of [2Fe-2S] NpFdxs (a) and [4Fe-4S] NpFdxs (b) with Bfirs respectively. Functional cysteines for [Fe-S] centers are marked in red.

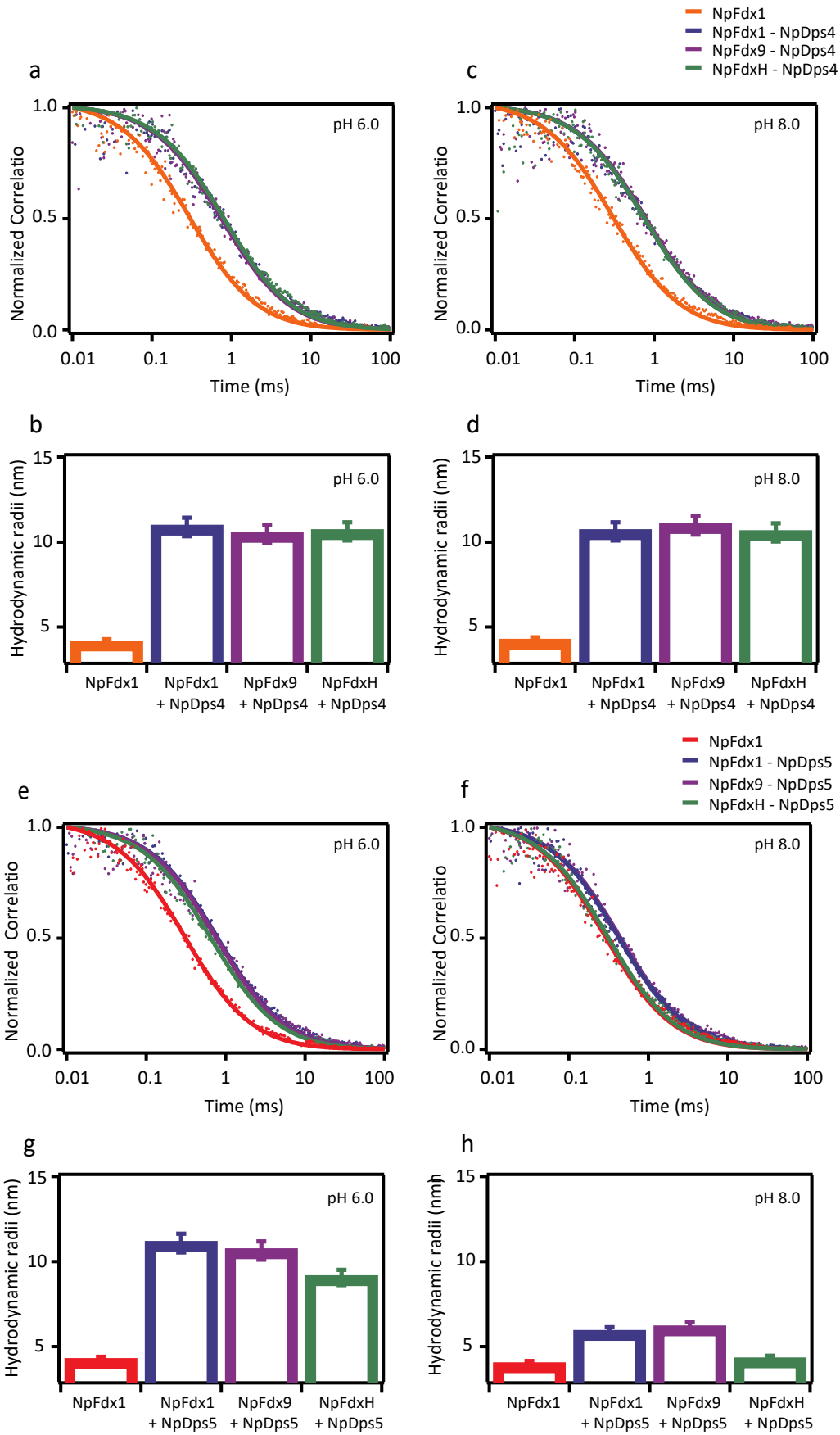


**Figure S3.** NpDps multimerization studied at different pH. Gel filtration profiles of recombinant NpDps4, NpDps5 and EcDps at two pH conditions: pH 6.0 (10 mM MES, 150 mM NaCl) and pH 8.0 (10 mM Tris, 150 mM NaCl) at 4 °C using a HiLoad 16/600 Superdex 200 column. Proteins (ca. 0.35 - 0.5 mg per run) were equilibrated at given conditions for at least 30 min prior gel filtration at 4 °C. The absorption units at 280 nm are in mAU. For EcDps at both pH conditions and for NpDps4 at pH 8.0 two subsequent injections are shown. Numbers adjacent to the major peaks represent calculated multimeric state (only once annotated for each chromatogram) of the Dps with standard deviations below 5 %. EcDps served as a control for NpDps multimerization.

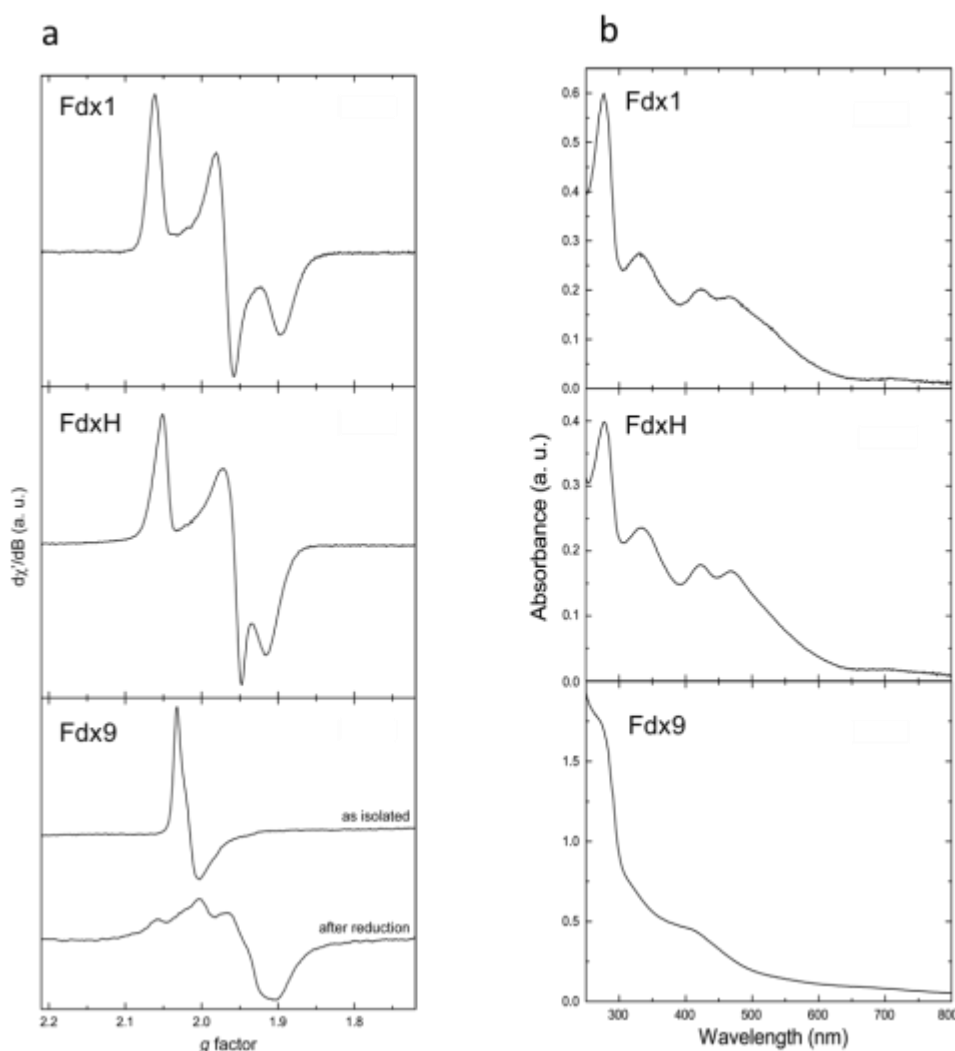




**Figure S4.** Normalized FCS correlation traces of the NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH at pH 6.0. In all cases a control experiment measuring the diffusion time of Atto647N free dye was calculated. Triplet state populations considered that were less than 10 %.



**Figure S5.** FCS traces of NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH with NpDps4 and with NpDps5 at different pH conditions (pH 6.0 and 8.0). Normalized FCS correlation traces and corresponding apparent hydrodynamic radius of the NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH in the presence of the NpDps4 at pH 6.0 (a & b) and pH 8.0 (c & d) respectively. Normalized FCS correlation traces and corresponding apparent hydrodynamic radii of the NpFdx1, NpFdx9 and NpFdxH in the presence of the NpDps5 at pH 6.0 (a & b) and 8.0 (c & d) respectively. All FCS traces are in comparison with the NpFdxs alone accordingly. All experiments were carried out at 21 °C.



**Figure S6.** UV-visible and electron paramagnetic resonance spectra of NpFdx1, NpFdxH and NpFdx9 proteins. NpFdx1 (100  $\mu$ M) after chemical reduction with dithionite ( $T = 15$  K, 32  $\mu$ W), NpFdxH (185  $\mu$ M) after chemical reduction with dithionite ( $T = 15$  K, 32  $\mu$ W) and NpFdx9 (33  $\mu$ M) as isolated ( $T = 7$  K, 2 mW) and after reduction with dithionite ( $T = 11$  K, 2 mW) are presented in upper, middle and lower parts in the panel a. Reduced NpFdx1 and NpFdxH present spectra characteristic of [2Fe-2S] centers. NpFdx9 presents a minor population of [3Fe-4S] centers in its as-isolated state, and [4Fe-4S] centers after reduction. UV-visible spectra of as-isolated NpFdx1, NpFdxH and NpFdx9 proteins are presented in upper, middle and lower parts in the panel b. NpFdx1 and NpFdxH present UV-visible spectra characteristic for [2Fe-2S] proteins. NpFdx9 presents broad bands in the near UV-visible regions suggesting the presence of [3Fe-4S] and/or [4Fe-4S] centers.