

Being the PDS Triad: My PDS Experiences as a Teacher Candidate, a Mentoring Teacher, and Beyond

Nisreen Daoud, George Mason University

ABSTRACT: This article describes the journey of a current doctoral student from teacher candidacy to inservice work and mentor teaching to studying effective teacher preparation. The purpose of the article is to investigate the importance of the PDS triad—teacher candidate, mentor teacher, and university instructor—through one person’s perspective. Having experienced two of these roles and studying the third, I discuss the importance of all stakeholders in the success of a teacher candidate’s experience. More specifically, the article discusses the importance of highly effective mentor teachers in shaping and informing each aspect of the PDS triad.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #4- a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #8- work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings

Introduction

Standard 2 of the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2015) details the necessity for strong partnerships among preparation providers, school districts, and the community to create high quality clinical partnerships. Professional Development Schools (PDS) have been established to continue supporting teacher candidates. This article describes my experiences going through an Elementary Education PDS program at a university, working at a PDS site, becoming a mentor teacher, and beginning my doctoral studies focused on teacher preparation. I am uniquely positioned, as I have been able to experience PDS practice through several perspectives. My perceptions shed light on the intricate, yet delicate, collaborative efforts of the triad consisting of the teacher candidate, school-based teacher educator, and campus-based teacher educator (Association of Teacher Educators, 2000).

Over the past several years, I have been able to reflect on my changing role within a PDS program; I began as a teacher candidate five years ago. After graduating, I began working at the PDS site where I completed my clinical experience. As I entered my third year of teaching, I became a mentor teacher for a teacher candidate in the same program. Shortly after, I transferred schools and began my doctoral work at the same university. Throughout my clinical experience, I recorded my thoughts, trials, tribulations, and successes in reflective journals. The journals included reflections on my time spent during field experiences and throughout my clinical experience at the PDS site. As a mentor teacher, I recorded commentary on the progress of my teacher candidate. In addition to the artifacts listed above, my ever-changing notions of various members of the triad began to take shape in the coursework I completed in my doctoral program, prompting me to reflect on my own experience.

While this article describes implementation of the PDS philosophy from multiple perspectives, I focus primarily on the influence of the mentor teacher on candidate growth and experience. My various experiences highlight the necessity of stronger “PDS-educated” mentors who share a common understanding of the goals and purposes of the PDS philosophy. Being able to have experienced the PDS from several perspectives gives me a more holistic view of the various stakeholders. This allows me to discuss the PDS triad from several viewpoints and examine how a mentor can assist in the growth of a candidate. In addition, my experiences shed light on the negative relationships that can occur within the triad. Specifically, I discuss the negative attitudes a teacher candidate can begin to develop when they have difficulty forming a positive relationship with a mentor teacher. The article concludes with several considerations PDS teacher education programs should investigate in order to help form highly effective future teachers.

Being the Teacher Candidate

The PDS program I completed spanned a year and a half. Two or three classes were taken each semester, along with other requirements. During the first semester, I was expected to complete 30 field hours in a kindergarten classroom at a public, Title I school. During the following summer semester, I helped create and run a math camp for elementary students. The following year was spent primarily at my PDS site, occurring concurrently with courses at the university. During that internship year, I spent the first two quarters observing in the mentor teacher’s classroom that I was assigned. Throughout this time, I interacted with students and also began to teach small groups or lessons sparingly. I returned from winter break to the same fourth grade classroom in which I was assigned for nine more weeks. I began to take over teaching several subjects,

leading up to a two-week independent teaching period. After completing my independent teaching, I spent one final week in the classroom, gradually releasing leadership back to the classroom teacher.

The next nine weeks I was guided by a second mentor teacher in a kindergarten classroom. I had to quickly acclimate to the class as I began teaching several subjects by the end of my second week. I spent another two weeks independently teaching. After one last week in the classroom, again gradually releasing responsibility back to the teacher, I left the PDS site in late April. Observations and feedback from the university facilitator occurred weekly throughout the experience. I completed my final course that summer and was licensed to teach.

I spent a majority of my clinical experience, as described above, in the fourth grade classroom. I was placed with a mentor teacher who was willing to host an intern but had not taken the university course on how to be a PDS mentor. Similarly, my second placement mentor teacher was also new to the program. From the perspective of a teacher candidate, it was apparent that both teachers were unsure of their role and responsibilities. It felt as though I was spending a great amount of time and effort walking both mentor teachers through the process. I was struggling between surviving independent teaching and teaching my mentor teachers PDS protocol, which I myself was new to. This challenge led me to question my future and it alienated me in my development as a teacher. After a series of frustrating episodes during my independent teaching, I wrote the following reflection one afternoon after a rough independent teaching day:

I still regret everything from last week and hate the person I was. I just felt so alone and on my own. I had people telling me to use things that I had no access to!! I kind of felt like it was me against everyone else.

I was beginning to question not only myself as a teacher, but also question the validity of my mentor teacher. In addition, I began resenting the mentor teacher and not wanting to continue working with him. As the intern, I wasn't concerned with his lack of understanding, but more so focused on the lack of support I was receiving. It was difficult for me to see why he was having such difficulty working with me, leading to constant frustration for both of us.

I continued to struggle during my experiences in the PDS due to what seemed like a triad that was built on miscommunication and unsure expectations. Feeling defeated, appropriate support from my university facilitator allowed me to rekindle my passion for teaching. In a reflection, I commented:

I did question myself for awhile there and what I was doing, but never once did I give up. I did joke about quitting, though I have never imagined actually doing it. (UF) walked in today and told me that he was really proud of me. I don't think he knows just how much

that really meant to me...I spent the week really working on me. Thank you (UF)!

The role of the university facilitator is critical in creating a successful experience for teacher candidates (Association of Teacher Educators, 2000). While their role generally is to bridge the gap between the university and the school, they have an even more critical role. University facilitators should continuously reevaluate and re-plan learning experiences based upon the individual teacher candidate's needs, which can be accomplished by staying actively involved in the field experience (Association of Teacher Educators, 2000; Linton & Gordon, 2015).

In addition, more attention needs to be paid to the amount of time and experience offered not only to teacher candidates but also to mentor teachers. Having two inexperienced mentor teachers was burdensome for me as a teacher candidate. Many researchers suggest that mentor teachers need to be highly effective, experienced practitioners who are carefully selected to work with candidates (Haj-Broussard et al., 2015; Rust & Clift, 2015; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). PDS partnerships must work to ensure teacher candidates are given mentor teachers well equipped to effectively support candidates. Mentor teachers should understand their roles and how to best maintain the collaboration with their teacher candidate. The need for school-based stakeholders to carefully select teachers to serve as mentors is imperative moving forward (Matsko & Hammerness, 2013). While the university triad member can be critical for supporting the candidate, as in the case illustrated above, the mentor teacher must also be positively influential. A rigorous process for selecting and maintaining mentor teachers is critical in developing the PDS partnership.

Being the Mentor Teacher

Taking a teaching position at the PDS site where I completed my internship allowed me to smoothly make the transition from teacher candidate to teacher. I was able to focus primarily on my practice, as I already knew the structures, procedures, and routines of the school. I taught fourth grade for two years, and I was moved to fifth grade at the start of my third year teaching. While I was still adjusting to this change, I was tasked with becoming a mentor teacher for a new teacher candidate at the school. Despite feeling overwhelmed, needing to learn content for the grade level, I cautiously accepted the position. I felt honored to be identified as a mentor teacher.

Mentor teachers need to be expert teachers who are aware of the goals of the teacher preparation program and who use a supportive approach to support the candidate (Association of Teacher Educators, 2000; Linton & Gordon, 2015). While I felt uncomfortable being the expert for the teacher candidate, I was well aware of the goals of my role. Having been through the program myself, I was prepared to offer her the support, feedback, and reflection necessary for a successful experience.

For example, in a biweekly progress report, I offered her feedback on managing her time by stating:

Management is still something that can be improved. Coming into a classroom halfway through the year can pose many obstacles. She is slowly beginning to be firmer with them and it's great. Time management of lessons can get tighter. As she continues to take on more responsibility, she will notice how little leeway there is in the schedule.

I often reflected on my own experience as I mentored her through her experience. As can be seen above, I was reminded of my own experience going into my second placement in the middle of February. I wanted her to understand her process was a normal feeling and I was there to support her in any way with this difficult transition. Feeling as though I didn't get enough support myself, I knew that I wanted to provide a better experience as a mentor.

Former teacher candidates who become mentor teachers can be advantageous for PDS sites. These PDS alumni are aware the purpose of the program is to enhance and support future practitioners (Rust & Clift, 2015). Having gone through the program myself, I was able to offer the teacher candidate thoughtful insights on what to expect. For example, as the teacher candidate I was mentoring approached her two-week independent teaching, I wrote to her:

As we get ready for independent teaching, as stressful as it is, relax and enjoy this time! It will not be easy, but know that there is an abundance of support around. Use the resources around you, don't hesitate to ask for help from anyone, and be open-minded. Be mindful as you plan as to what the standards are asking, what they need to know for the standards, and how you can BEST teach it. Just stay reflective and you will BE FINE!!

As can be seen in my comment, I appealed to her from my own experience as a teacher candidate in her shoes. I offered her comfort in knowing this wasn't an easy process, but there was plenty of support around her she should utilize. As a result of this open relationship I built with her, she never hesitated during her independent teaching to ask me for support or help. For me, that instilled in her this notion of what teaching is meant to be, collaboration among many individuals. As the mentor, I wanted her to understand that I was always there to support her growth and development, even during independent teaching. Through this relationship, she and I were able to work successfully.

Creating the cyclic teacher candidate to teacher mentor flow can create stronger connections between the university and school, may create a larger selection of expert mentor teachers, and seems to give way to more passionate mentors. More

research is needed to discover how beneficial of a process this can be for the success of future teacher candidate experiences.

Learning to be a Teacher Educator

The following year, I moved to a non-PDS school and began my doctoral work at the same university I had been associated with over the past five years. I found myself not only appreciating the role of the campus-based teacher educator, but also strengthening my understanding of the mentor teacher and the triad's partnership. The collaborative arrangements in the triad are critical and the university facilitator has to be diligent and intentional to create an efficient partnership between the school and university (Association of Teacher Educators, 2000). While I currently enjoy my new school, no longer being at a PDS site allowed me to further appreciate the pedagogical growth I received from collaborating with the university facilitator, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates. At a PDS there is a certain degree of camaraderie among teachers striving to not only become stronger mentors, but better teachers themselves.

Standard 3 of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010) identifies the elements necessary for PDS partners engaging in joint work: designing roles and structures to enhance collaboration and developing parity and systematically recognizing and celebrating the joint work and contributions of each partner. It seems as though along with the university providing information to mentors, all mentor teachers need to be held accountable for seeking out information on the goals of the partnership. In order for mentors to support teachers effectively, a mentor must adequately understand the background on the program, their role, and the candidates they receive. The need for significant mentoring and support before a candidate enters the work force is a necessity (Zeichner & Bier, 2015). For the experience to be beneficial for all stakeholders, common understandings must be established prior to beginning collaboration. Mentor teachers need to take a more active role in being prepared prior to mentoring candidates, as well as during the mentoring process.

Creating a common understanding between the members of the triad can strengthen the collaborative process. As both the teacher candidate and mentor teacher, my work in triads would have benefitted through better communication and shared goals.

Appreciating the Experience

Throughout my short career, I have been able to encapsulate the perspective of a teacher candidate, an inservice teacher, and a mentor teacher. Additionally, I am currently exploring more closely how the university attempts to negotiate PDS relationships. My experiences suggest while the university and teacher candidates have a common understanding of expectations and outcomes, mentor teachers may not always clearly understand. The education of mentor teachers about PDS partnerships and deliberate selection of mentor teachers will ensure a closer aligned understanding of their role.

In addition, my experiences have taught me defining the roles of each member of the triad is critical for sustaining collaborative relationships (Zeichner & Bier, 2105). I am able to appreciate the dilemma of being the intern, the effectiveness necessary to be a mentor, and the delicacy of being the campus-based educator. As the Association of Teacher Educators (2000) suggests, true collaboration requires sufficient time. Collaboration among these three individuals is not easily achieved, yet can be powerful when successful. Each member of the triad is invaluable for a successful experience. Together, the stakeholders create the experience a teacher candidate takes with them as they begin their teaching career.

Implications for Consideration

From my experiences as a teacher candidate, inservice teacher, mentor teacher, and doctoral student, PDS programs may consider many aspects. First, experiences discussed above describe how a PDS can cultivate not only highly effective teachers, but also help shape future mentor teachers as well (Zeichner & Bier, 2015). As programs are being designed, teacher educators should consider ways to continue incorporating graduating candidates in the PDS cycle. Through this design, a PDS may create more highly effective teacher mentors that are knowledgeable in the role and outcomes of a PDS. Additionally, this may cut down on the need for educating mentor teachers on their specific roles.

Secondly, my experiences should serve as a reminder that choosing highly effective mentors is critical for candidate growth (Association of Teacher Educators, 2000; Linton & Gordon, 2015). A PDS should implement a rigorous process for the selection of mentors. Through this selection process, teacher educators can ensure candidates are working with mentors who have the necessary knowledge to help in growth and development. Similarly, a PDS should ensure all mentor teachers have been given the necessary education to work with candidates. To avoid the resentment I felt with novice mentors,

teacher educators should attempt to provide mentors with necessary training prior to their work with candidates. Continued examination of the PDS triad is necessary in order to develop highly effective mentors and future teachers. ^{SUP}

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