Lessons Learned: Aligning Voices from the Inside with Nine Essentials of Professional Development Schools

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ABSTRACT: This exploratory case study documents the experiences shared by teacher candidates and cooperating teachers in two contrasting Professional Development School (PDS) sites over four semesters. At the ends of semesters during which courses were moved from the traditional university site delivery to public middle schools as part of an emerging PDS, focus group interviews were conducted with teacher candidates and then with classroom teachers to document their experiences. Their voices were solicited because much that went on between them and outside of what could be directly observed by those making decisions is important for identifying what would strengthen a PDS model. Eight themes were identified: communication, barriers to practice, teacher uncertainty, candidate uncertainty, building relationships, on-site presence, integrating into the culture, and experiential learning. Findings were held up to the Nine Essentials of Professional Development Schools as identified by the National Association of Professional Development Schools to show what is being done well and what opportunities exist to make this teacher education model more effective.

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; 2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; 3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; 4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; 5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants; 6. An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved; 7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration; 8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings; 9. Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures

The Professional Development School (PDS) model of teacher education is viewed by many as an improvement over the traditional university classroom-based teacher preparation program. In a PDS, university courses for teacher preparation are taught at a public K-12 school campus, and teacher candidates and university faculty participate more genuinely in the everyday experiences had by middle grades students and their teachers. When our university first set out to implement the PDS model, we wanted to make sure teacher candidates had diverse experiences and knew we needed to document the implementation through the perceptions of teacher candidates. The qualitative case study presented here sought to explore teacher candidates' and their cooperating teachers' perceptions as the program transitioned from a traditional middle grades teacher education program to the PDS model.

Because the nature of many traditional university-based teacher-training programs isolates faculty and candidates from the milieu in which new graduates will ultimately be immersed, an emphasis on strong relationships between the universities and their local P-12 schools is important. Although this is the case, defining and ensuring these relationships can be challenging. In 2008, the NAPDS published a statement to officially define the nature of partnerships that functioned as Professional Development Schools (PDS). The statement includes a list of nine "essentials" that must be in place in order for the partnership to be recognized as a PDS. Our research and findings are analyzed through this lens. The Nine Essentials are:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community;
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need;

4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants;
6. An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved;
7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration;
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings;
9. Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures (NAPDS, 2008).

Additionally, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, formerly the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, or NCATE) requires evidence of "effective partnerships and high-quality clinical practice" in order to meet Standard 2: Clinical Partnerships and Practice (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013, p. 7). Components of this standard call for university and school partners to "co-select" and "co-construct" various elements of new teacher preparation (CAEP, 2013).

Professional Development Schools are not only useful because they are defined and expected by these organizations, however. These collaborative relationships help bridge gaps between theory and practice, both between university faculty and classroom teachers and within teacher candidates (McBee & Moss, 2002). The literal distance that exists between university classrooms and public school classrooms is collapsed when teacher candidates engage with faculty, students, and administrators in school settings. University faculty and classroom teachers have opportunities to put research to work as they solve practical problems. Teacher candidates can see this process modeled as well as have opportunities to practice themselves, with the guidance of more experienced practitioners. Ideally, then, new graduates from PDS models who witnessed and engaged in these collaborations themselves, experience fewer struggles as they try to apply research in their own classrooms as beginning teachers (Marchand, Olafson & Steaffens, 2013).

Background and Local Context

The middle grades education program in which we teach is located in a mid-sized public institution in the Southeast. For many years this institution was a community college that served the local population, offering four-year degrees and a range of continuing education courses. Over time it has evolved, becoming a state university and then, most recently, merging with the only public medical college in the state and aspiring to the status of a research intensive university. Teacher candidates, in large part, still come primarily from the surrounding community. As evidence of this, new residence halls have been added to our campus only in the last couple of years. Due to the fact that many of our candidates are local residents, it is not uncommon for them to spend field experiences in schools they once attended, and even to reconnect with a former teacher.

Our institution has utilized a more traditional program of study to date, but recently began shifting toward the PDS model. Links among university programs and schools are critical for the middle school movement, as well as due to the current state of educational reform (Howell, P. B., Carpenter, J., & Jones, J. P., 2013). Therefore, a small number of courses have been moved to two local middle schools. In the first fall of implementation teacher candidates attended two foundational courses in the middle grades education curriculum, *Middle Level Programs and Schools* and *The Nature and Needs of Young Adolescents* at a local middle school. In the first spring, two more courses, *Classroom Management* and *Active Learning in the Middle Grades Classroom*, were moved off campus.

The first school, School A, in which we worked is located very close to our campus. A majority-minority student population provided an important contrast for our mostly-Caucasian teacher candidate population, because we intend to be a part of ongoing efforts in teacher education to better prepare White teachers to work with diverse student populations (Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail, & Portes, 2018; Rychly & Graves, 2018; Warren, 2018). The second school we worked with, School B, is located in an adjacent suburban county and has a majority White student population. Our candidates are more likely to seek teaching positions upon graduation in the latter county. It seemed natural to use the close relationships with teachers and middle school students that are possible in a Professional Development School to embed candidates in environments less familiar to them.

Our state's adoption of the standardized edTPA portfolio for new teacher certification was another factor in our decision to transition our middle grades education program to a PDS model. In this assessment candidates respond to writing prompts that ask them to describe the characteristics of students' personal lives, the community, and culture. We felt that significant learning opportunities could be built to practice noticing, thinking about, and utilizing these characteristics in instructional design and delivery by being close to the students.

Description and Structure of our Program's Particular Model

For each education class teacher candidates are enrolled in, they must spend 25 hours in the classroom in which they are placed during what we call "field experience weeks." These five weeks take place in the 8-12th weeks of a 16 week semester. During that time, classes are not held for those courses with field experiences. Teacher candidates will have an average of 75 hours each semester to complete from the education courses they are taking. Each course has assignments for candidates to

complete in their field classrooms that align with course objectives. For example, if the course is on integrating literacy, teacher candidates teach a three-lesson segment in one of their content areas that integrates a reading strategy. In the course on the nature and needs of young adolescents, candidates complete a shadow study of a middle grades student throughout a full school day.

For the PDS courses in particular, additional classroom time is utilized as the teacher candidates are already in the assigned school prior to the start of the five lab weeks. For the observations during PDS classes, candidates are typically paired up to observe and reflect on the connections they can find among university course topics and classroom visits. These 20-30 minute visits occur during class time and discussions afterward are led by the course instructor to help candidates relate their observations to course content.

Planning meetings between university instructors and school administration occurred typically about a month before the courses began onsite. At those planning meetings, we would discuss the professional development model, introduce the principal to the Nine Essentials, and collaborate ways for the partnership to be mutually beneficial. Each PDS site has a "building coordinator" who serves as the liaison between the school and university who would also be invited to the meetings. At this pre-semester meeting, we would also figure out a time for the university instructors to attend a faculty meeting to introduce themselves, explain the partnership, and ask for input from teachers on how they or the teacher candidates could be integrated into the school days.

Methods

Researchers investigated the challenges, successes, and opportunities that exist in this new cooperative teacher preparation model. This study was guided by the following research question: What do teacher candidates and classroom teachers perceive to be the challenges, successes, and opportunities in a professional development school model as opposed to a traditional middle school teacher preparation model?

Participants

The higher education institution and partner PDS locations were situated in a large, suburban city located in the southeast United States. PDS locations included schools from both high and low socioeconomic districts. Participants for the study were purposively selected from teacher candidates attending the partner higher education institution and working in PDS schools, and classroom teachers working within the partnered PDS locations. Teacher candidates were current students in the middle grades education undergraduate program, and were at various places in their programs of study, ranging from the first semester following acceptance into the program to the semester just before student teaching.

Demographics of Teacher Candidates

Fall 1

Male	Female	White	Black	Other Race
3	6	6	1	2

Spring 1

Male	Female	White	Black	Other Race
1	15	11	3	1

Fall 2

Male	Female	White	Black	Other Race
9	13	15	7	0

Spring 2

Male	Female	White	Black	Other Race
10	9	14	4	1

Demographics of Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers included those employed in the partner schools who were chosen by the building coordinator for a candidate to be placed in their classroom. In both schools we encountered issues of not having enough teachers of a particular content area for which we had a high number of teacher candidates needing to practice planning and delivering lessons. Our solution was to place two candidates in these classrooms.

Demographics of Teachers at School A

Male	Female	White	Black	Other Race
3	11	14	0	0

Demographics of Teachers at School B

Male	Female	White	Black	Other Race
4	8	5	7	0

Interview Protocol

To capture participants' perspectives, the researchers developed an interview protocol consisting of semi-structured questions to guide the focus groups (See Appendices A and B). Interviews were conducted at the end of each of the four semesters included in the study. The goal of the interview was to collect evidence of the experiences had by teacher candidates and classroom teachers and to compare these to the standards explicated in the Nine Essentials. Questions were developed with a program evaluation mindset, and questions were reviewed by two external program evaluation experts to assist with construct validity. For example, classroom teachers were asked questions such as, "In what ways, if any, did the university candidates make a positive contribution to your class or to the school?" to identify ways the emerging PDS model adhered to, or failed to meet, the

recommendations of the NAPDS. Teacher candidates were asked questions such as, "How, if at all, has the experience of completing your course work within an actual middle school benefited you? (as a student, professional, etc.)" to gather their perceptions of the effectiveness of the PDS. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

Procedures and Data Analysis

Evidence of challenges and successes related to the "Nine Essentials" was collected in two forms. Separate focus groups were conducted with classroom teachers and teacher candidates at the end of each semester over the course of four semesters. Focus groups occurred at the higher education institution for teacher candidates and at each PDS site for teacher participants. Focus groups were audio recorded after participants were informed of the purpose of the interview and voluntary nature of the interview. Additionally, teacher candidates were asked to respond anonymously to open-ended survey questions, which were intended to capture additional feedback the candidates were not comfortable offering in the presence of peers. Since the nature of the topic was considered routine program evaluation, consent was not required; however, participation in focus groups was voluntary and confidential. Participants were recruited for participation via email. Identifying information was removed from transcripts prior to data analysis.

Data analysis. Upon the completion of each focus group, the data was transcribed and cleaned for identifying information. First, thematic content analysis was used to explore themes that emerged naturally from the data. We analyzed the data qualitatively by initially using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding system to write down any thoughts as we read the articles and books. From there, codes were applied that resulted in categories. We used a combination of content and thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002) because some categories (i.e. benefits and drawbacks) were predetermined, yet others emerged from the data. The data analysis process involved one researcher starting the process then incorporating review and feedback from the other two researchers. This researcher triangulation process was repeated until consensus about findings was reached. Second, the researchers reviewed the raw data and emergent themes for evidence of (or lack of) the "Nine Essentials." Similarly, the process was repeated until consensus was met. Content analysis was performed within MAXQDA in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Sinkovics, 2008).

Results

Reflections from faculty, as well as teacher candidates, served as evidence of how well the PDS was developing in accordance with recommendations. John Dewey's model of "reflective action" helped structure deliberate thinking aimed at improving the PDS: "Reflective action is bound up with persistent and careful consideration of practice in the light of knowledge and beliefs, showing attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness" (as cited in Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 34). It is likely not a coincidence that Dewey's particular conceptualization of reflective action lies at the heart of effective PDS collaborations; words such as "reciprocal," "shared," and "ongoing," that appear multiple times in the Nine Essentials require dedicated participants to identify and resolve obstacles to improve future opportunities.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to capture the voices of candidates and teachers as they interacted with each other and operated within a PDS structure with two different student populations. The answers to our research question, "What are the challenges, successes, and opportunities that exist in a professional development school model as opposed to a traditional middle school teacher preparation model?" emerged into eight themes that were then analyzed through the lens of the Nine Essentials of Professional Development Schools. The themes regarding challenges or opportunities are: 1) communication, 2) barriers to practice due to the design, 3) teacher uncertainty, and 4) candidate uncertainty; the themes regarding benefits or successes are: 1) building relationships, 2) on-site presence, 3) integrating into the culture, and 4) experiential learning. The following sections will provide details and evidence to support the aforementioned themes before discussing the meanings behind them. The challenges and opportunities are presented first, followed by the successes of the PDS implementation.

Challenges

Beginning a PDS model, particularly at the middle school level, can have its challenges. After analyzing the data, these difficulties were evident in four main themes. Teacher candidates and in-service teachers had issues with communication, barriers to practice, and uncertainty with the new program as felt by candidates and by teachers. Each of these themes are discussed below.

Communication

Communication is an important element of any type of partnership, and in this study, issues and failures with communication both internally in the school, as well as university to school were cited. An example was a principal and a collaborating teacher not understanding the new, unique presence of teacher candidates in the PDS as opposed to teacher candidates' previous presence in our traditional model. In the PDS candidates were asked to teach more lessons as opposed to spending more time observing. Similarly, the collaborating teachers were not aware of the exact times teacher candidates would visit their classes during the university class scheduled times on site because the times would vary. In the words of one teacher candidate, "I think the mismatch is where the mentor teachers don't exactly know those expectations for us so they don't really know what to do with us sometimes. I think that's where the mismatch comes in." Efforts to improve communi-

cation were not always well received. For example, university supervisors once scheduled a meeting with all the collaborating teachers in School A, but only a few attended.

Barriers to Practice

Data emerged related to general barriers to the design of the PDS structure. These barriers included misaligned content and expectations, short classroom visits, missed opportunities, and limited internet. One disconnect centered around the lack of implementation of the middle school model in the partner schools. In the words of a collaborating teacher describing planning with a teacher candidate, "So, we'd find a lesson that would be suitable, and she'd say well I also have to make it interdisciplinary and and I'm like wait wait, what." Similarly, teacher candidates felt it difficult to align what they were learning in the university class with what they were seeing in the middle school classrooms. One commented, "I felt like we were being like really pushy and like trying to relate to the course subject to the school."

The second barrier was the structure of classroom visits themselves that occurred during the university class time. As the university faculty transitioned to classes on site, a compromise had to take place regarding course activities and content that was previously "covered" during the 2.5 hour class meeting. Reflection took place around what was an appropriate amount of time for classroom visits that did not deter from the integrity of the course, but took appropriate advantage of the purpose of the class being located at a middle school. One collaborating teacher shared, "I understand that we don't want it to be staged. We want it to be real and authentic, but I don't really think that 20 minutes is long enough, because you can come at the tail-10 minutes of this class, then you have five minutes to transition, and then by the time I get this class up and running, before I even get to the meat, they're gone."

The final barriers to the PDS design as it was implemented in our setting were related to logistical issues such as limited internet (blocked websites), entry into the building, and university course and school-day schedules. At School A, teacher candidates did not have a key to enter the building, so they had to wait for someone to approach the door or walk around to the front to get buzzed in. School B provided key fobs to the teacher candidates that were very helpful. Due to the nature of middle school bell schedules and teacher planning time varying by grade level, it was difficult to land on a certain time that worked well for all teacher candidates at the same time. We sometimes used the ISS class and the lunchroom as fallback options. This connected with the intended learning outcomes of the Nature and Needs of the Young Adolescent course, but not other courses. Another challenge relates to lower enrollment in our college. Undergraduate content pedagogy courses have to be combined with MAT students for the class to have a large enough enrollment, and since many MAT students are employed as teachers, these classes have to be in the evening. Therefore, content pedagogy courses are not options for PDS classes.

Teacher Uncertainty

A third theme emerged around some of the classroom teachers having an uncertain perception of the arrangement. From the collaborating teacher standpoint, these comments focused on the teacher candidates being a "nuisance" and "distraction." A few teacher candidates had questions about what the point of the PDS partnership really was and were confused about the benefits it offered. Teacher candidates were told by some teachers that they were not welcomed there, but that the principal told them they had to let them be there. A teacher candidate from School A said, "I was verbally told that she didn't have time for me, and another suggested that "there should have been a screening process for the teachers who were chosen because, I mean, they were very discouraging; it felt like it was just plopped on them, rather than they being like oh I would love to have someone come into my classroom." Even in informal situations such as the lunch room and in the hallways, teacher candidates reported being told they were a distraction. Teacher candidates wanted to talk with and form relationships with the students, but the collaborating teachers wanted silence in the halls because they were "trying to get them to behave." Collaborating teachers went to the professors to request that they tell the teacher candidates not to speak to the middle school students because "it excites them."

Candidate Uncertainty

Some candidates shared that meeting for undergraduate lectures at the PDS school was useless and distracting. As one candidate explained, "Ninety percent of the things we did could have been done in the classroom. I feel like the overall experience was more of a hassle for the teachers, administrators, and for us." Candidates thought as far as their personal classroom work, "We could have done the same things being [on the university campus]." One candidate elaborated that they had difficulty accessing online learning resources they needed for their own lectures because "if we were pulling them up on a screen, most of [the professor's] things are blocked" at the PDS school. Some candidates did not believe there was much of a difference between the traditional model and the lab time associated with the PDS model, and did not see the benefit of the PDS model, "I felt like I pretty much did what I did in my first education classes because unless I was teaching lessons, all I did was sit and observe. So it was no different besides the lessons, than the traditional classes." One candidate went so far as to suggest the class could have been an "online class. There was no difference with the labs."

Candidates did seem to be torn between preferring the traditional model and the PDS model because they did value the time spent interacting with students and "just becoming a set figure," so the suggestion was made to hold lecture classes at the university and "maybe choose a day or two where we would meet at the middle school, do our observations, and then have our lab time rather than every day be at the middle school."

Prior to the PDS arrangement, the semester calendar included five weeks of field experience during which time class meetings are not held. Traditionally, candidates were given placements at a variety of local schools, and this allowed for rich comparisons to be made upon reconvening. Compared to this schedule, candidates expressed dissatisfaction with the majority of the candidates being placed at one school and completing lab weeks together. One candidate summarized the class's experiences within the same school with this comment, "I think there were all different experiences, but all in all, they were pretty much similar. Now, everyone did not have the same experience, but it's not as it would have been if it had been" if candidates shared what happened at different schools. One candidate commented, "I really did miss hearing all of those different perspectives when we came back from our student teaching placements. I really missed that this semester."

Candidates expressed concern about the amount of interaction time allotted for on-site class meetings. In the current format, candidates attend their own undergraduate classes at the middle school. Courses are designed to allow for lecture with 20-minute breakout observation and interaction allowances. Candidates saw great value in the time they were allowed to interact with students and teachers within the 20-minute space as one student described, "I did enjoy being able to see the students, and you know, having the ability to interact with them. Because we did have times during the class periods where we could go off and visit the cafeteria, or visit ISS and things like that, so we did get to see, like all of that during our class time." Candidates wanted to interact with the students "as much as possible," but there was an overall consensus that the 20-minute space presented issues. As one candidate stated, "It doesn't feel like much information is coming out of the 20-minute class observations."

Candidates expressed the 20-minute space felt more like an obstruction to the classroom. One candidate expressed, "For that short amount of time, distracting everybody. I didn't want to be in there and you could tell they didn't want you to be in there." Another candidate summed this sentiment up by stating the 20-minute drop-ins were "more harmful than helpful" as they felt they "basically interrupted the class for 20 minutes. It was not a good experience at all." Candidates' complaints about the expectations around this limited observation time revolved around the issue of not having enough time to interact with the students because of timing or miscommunication with the classroom teacher. As one candidate explained, "Yeah we were supposed to talk to the students, [but] we got in trouble for it. I kind of just sat in the back of the room and just didn't get to do anything."

Candidates were in agreement the idea around the on-site lecture with the observation built in was a good idea, but there needed to be more structure and extended time. One candidate captured this theme when she said, "I felt like we were being really pushy and trying to relate to course subject to the school. So it's like we talked about this today, go find it, see if you can find it real quick." Candidates commented on how trying to find what they were supposed to find based on the lecture during the 20-minute observation time was difficult because classroom teachers were well into their lessons.

Successes

Despite the challenges and concerns discovered in the data, multiple benefits were also reported. Teacher candidates felt they were positive role models for the students they interacted with and appreciated getting an early start preparing for the lessons they had to teach during field experience weeks by getting to know the students and the context. These positive themes emerged as building relationships, on-site presence, integrating into the culture, and experiential learning, and are described in the following sections.

Building Relationships

Both groups of participants reported an advantage of the PDS model was that it created an opportunity for networking and relationships. One collaborating teacher said, "I was surprised how quickly we built relationships with students from the small amount of time that we were there. The kids loved them because they were fresh faces, and they came with such positive attitudes and by that part of the year they were a little tired of me and hearing from me, so the kids would say would it be okay if she helps me instead? And I would say, yeah, go! You know, so they really connected with the kids, and the kids liked them." This discovered theme of relationships is similar to the findings of Ruben, Rigelman, & McParker who also explored stakeholder perceptions (2016).

Teacher candidates particularly appreciated being able to establish a presence at the school and relationships early with students and teachers during the pre-requisite foundational courses. Although minimal observation-only hours were required from the prerequisite courses, candidates believed the opportunity to observe and introduce themselves helped with the transition into the teacher preparation program. For example, one candidate stated, "I would say the education classes that we had to take as a prerequisite to get into the program don't really require you to do much." Another candidate thought the early observation was "a great idea."

Some teacher candidates also appreciated being in the PDS before the typical time they have scheduled for field experiences. One teacher candidate said, "I think one of the major benefits was being able to get to know your teacher and your students and their names before that five week period." Teacher candidates felt they had a positive impact on the middle school students by having another instructor in the room that was able to increase teacher to student interaction. Two teacher candidates spoke about it being convenient to be at the middle school for the "guest speakers" - school personnel - who were able to come to us in a classroom in their school, but who would not have been able to come to us on campus. Teacher candidates benefited from hearing from a physical education and health

teacher, a guidance counselor, and a special education teacher, by connecting with content that was addressed in class and in readings. A group of collaborating teachers participated in one class meeting that happened to take place during their planning time, and shared with the university class on the dynamics of interdisciplinary planning and teaming. Additionally, a group of collaborating teachers commented on visiting the university class and said, "A group of us went in and spoke to the class about what it's really like to have lesson planning. There's three of us that went together and the students in the class said that it worked really well. Because they could ask us questions, because they were developing their own lesson plans, umm, and it was kind of, they thought it was fantastic that they could get the real world version, not the textbook version, of how it works." Collaborating teachers also appreciated the current ideas and activities introduced to the classroom through the teacher candidates. Quotes from the focus groups mentioned games with die, "techy stuff," and active learning.

On-Site Presence

Overall, teacher candidates believed the amount of on-site student engagement was beneficial to both themselves and the middle school students. As one candidate expressed, "When we were in the classroom, we got to see what we were reading in the text, and we got to interact with an audience that we were going to work with." Another candidate provided a statement that captured the shared sentiment of the benefit of being on-site,

> I think being able to see your students in the hallway that you see all the time. You know they see your face and you're becoming a set figure. I think with my teacher even though me and her did not always view things the same way, I know that I could go back to her, like okay, can you help me with this or, you know, I need a recommendation for this, can you help me out with this? Building that relationship, being there, having to go there every Monday, Wednesday, and then those five weeks I think that does present a benefit because you're able to build a relationship with someone with, instead of those five weeks then you email them thanking them for letting you be there, you're kind of done.

Integrating into the Culture

Teacher candidates believed there was a benefit to holding their undergraduate course meetings on-site. Candidates thought the routine interaction and introduction to teachers and middle-grades students prior to their 5-week student teaching phase helped establish trust-building relationships. As a candidate explained, I think one of the major benefits was being able to get to know your teacher and your students before that five week period. Because in your five week period, you have to get so many hours of observation and then [female student] had to teach seven lessons. So within those five weeks you try to teach seven lessons, learn your students, learn them by name, so when you're there the first, you know, two months before you go and transition into that five weeks, you can start learning your students names and get to know your teacher. I knew what chapter they would be in by the time my lessons had come around so I could go ahead and get a head start on what I wanted to do and how I wanted to prepare my lesson.

Another candidate saw the benefit in the on-site presence in terms of the comfort level leading into the student teaching weeks, "I feel like the benefit that I saw was that I was comfortable and prepared before my lab hours. Like instead of saying, 'Just get out there,' we had those relationships built." One candidate was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to build relationships with the students, "I was surprised how quickly we built relationships with students from the small amount of time that we were there." Candidates even desired to spend more time with the students as one commented, "I wished I had more one-on-one time with the students. I wanted to get to know the students on a more personal level."

Experiential Learning

Candidates were in agreement that they learned more from being present in the school than from the lectures. One candidate was thrilled to be able to teach her lessons and receive immediate feedback from the students and teacher about her performance, "I was able to teach four lessons to the students and witness the results afterwards. It was just an amazing feeling. Sometimes I see the lesson in my head, but it doesn't always go the way I intended it to." Another candidate liked being able to experience "a more visual representation of the lecture for both classes."

Specifically, candidates appreciated the exposure to RTI processes, discipline issues, and interactions with special education teachers. One candidate commented on appreciating the fact they had time during the class "where we could go off and visit the cafeteria, or visit ISS and things like that." Another candidate liked she was able to sit in with a guidance counselor during meetings. Although candidates saw the value in learning on-site, they did believe there were "missed opportunities" and opportunities that should be considered for the future. For example, candidates discussed expanding on guest speakers and interaction, "There was a huge unit on RTI that we could have stepped in. The special education instructor did speak with us, but we could have just observed their team planning. We had a lot of speakers, [but] we didn't see a lot of action." Another candidate concurred, "And that's the purpose of being there is to be in that environment and is to get that experience." Candidates overall generally agreed, "For this being the first time that middle grades has done this [PDS model], I think there were opportunities that could have been capitalized on, but since this was the first time, I think they were missed."

Candidates, although challenged, appreciated being on-site at a school with behavior management and discipline issues

because they believed they learned what to expect in a school that is "far off from the ideal middle school," and "nowhere near the ideal level mentioned in the [text] book." Candidates expressed being overwhelmed at times with the discipline and classroom management issues at this host school, "I faced many challenges while I was observing but one that stood out the most is classroom management. Many times, I was ready to just scream my head off." Despite the challenges, overall, candidates believed, "I have a better perception of schools that have a lower overall socio-economic status. My perception of middle schools drastically changed because this school was different from the middle school I attended." One candidate remarked the knowledge gained from the school culture, "Discipline issues, where the students come from, I mean it's a great experience for all of us to see that type of school because we might end up being in one." Candidates realized the value of real-world exposure even commenting, "I don't think they should sugar coat it. I think it was a really good experience." They also reported learning from RTI meetings, parent conferences, and "Rule 20" meetings (final meeting before a student is sent to alternative school).

Discussion

This collection of teacher candidates' and classroom teachers' voices helps to shine a light on what might otherwise get missed in the work that is done by university faculty and administration as they build a professional development school. It can be difficult to get buy-in at every level from every person. For example, representatives from the leadership level of our organizations (i.e., department chair, dean, principals) were often the ones making decisions. Collecting the experiences of those working most closely together on a regular basis helps to inform those in leadership. Specifically, the thoughts collected from teachers and candidates can be used to genuinely reflect how well the PDS aligns with the Nine Essentials.

The first theme, communication, is a foundational element that clearly plays a role in all of the Nine Essentials. The specific comments shared by our participants indicate that we have opportunities to strengthen communication. This would help articulate the shared mission that is described in Essential #1, would strengthen the shared culture that is called for in Essential #2, and would help generate and support the innovative and reflective practice required in Essential #4. That communication is valued by those involved in our PDS work is evident in the fact that participants were willing to gather and share their experiences. This is evidence of the values expressed in Essential #7 of ongoing reflection and collaboration. Also, the presentation of our findings reflects a commitment to the "engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberative investigations of practice" that are called for in Essential #5.

The second theme, that of barriers to practice, brings together many points ranging from overall school day structure and university course requirements, to building and internet access. This could be viewed as evidence that the mission and preparation efforts had too narrow a focus, which is what Essential #1 seeks to avoid in its call for a "comprehensive mission" that looks not only at each constituent, but at them all from a birds'-eye view. Also, barriers to practice reflect opportunities to think more thoroughly about the "roles and responsibilities" described in Essential #6 of all parties that, when well-defined, ensure that issues such as building access or blocked internet sites are addressed ahead of time. The fact that candidates sometimes felt like they were only interrupting during the 20 minutes they visited classrooms indicates that the formal roles to be played by both university faculty and classroom teachers described in Essential #8, fell short in terms of ensuring that candidates felt purposeful.

The third theme, that of classroom teacher uncertainty, summarized teachers' lack of knowledge about both their own roles, in terms of how to best nurture the teacher candidate assigned to them, and the roles that their candidates were to play in instruction and classroom participation. This reveals a breakdown in the school-university culture explained in Essential #2 that expressly "embraces [future educators'] active engagement in the school community" (NAPDS, 2008). That the teachers may not have felt valued as collaborators, which is called for in Essential #7, may be a secondary consequence of the fact that expectations were not shared or agreed upon at the outset. Teacher candidate uncertainty, which is identified as the fourth theme, mirrors uncertainty felt by classroom teachers but in ways more relevant to the work in which they are engaged. Their experiences are clear evidence that Essential #9, "dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures," is not in place in a way that would make them feel valued in the school building.

Despite these opportunities that our professional development schools have to grow stronger, the themes bundled together as successes reveal that much is also going well for nurturing relationships between the university and the schools and for future middle grades educator preparation. Overall, it can be said that the transition from a traditional middle grades education program to a professional development school model reflects our community's commitment to innovative practice, which is central to Essential #4.

Both teacher candidates and cooperating teachers made statements about the benefits of the PDS for experiencing relationships in ways that they expect will help these new teachers to be successful. This is theme five, building relationships. For example, the cooperating teachers felt the extra time our teacher candidates spent in their classrooms helped them learn the middle school students' names, and knowing names helped facilitate interactions. Candidates felt that the relationships they formed as a result of time and proximity were beneficial. For example, one candidate commented that "we got to interact with an audience we were going to work with. That's what we are in the school for, so it benefited hugely." This serves as a microscopic example of an element of the shared culture of Essential #2 and of the difference this shared culture makes for future teachers.

Themes six and seven are related to the benefits that resulted from candidates having an on-site presence and how this helped them integrate into school culture. Similar to Wall and Draper (2017) writing about the benefit of "continuity" in a PDS model, our cooperating teachers felt the physical closeness between candidates and the actual goings-on of a middle school helped the candidates integrate into existing school culture. They mentioned some of these realities by name, such as when students would cry in the middle of class, or our most extreme experience, which was when a middle school student had a seizure.

Cooperating teachers felt closing the distance between theory and practice in this way is useful. Candidates themselves appreciated being "immersed in a different socioeconomic environment." This was particularly validating because, as was mentioned above, one of our PDS sites is one that, if allowed to do so, certain of our candidates would likely want to avoid. This proves that the comprehensive mission called for in Essential #1, that serves to "advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community" can guide the work of those engaged in professional development schools in transformative ways. Additionally, this speaks to the purpose behind the reflective practice that is called for in Essential #4. Without an opportunity for this growth and reflection, teacher candidates, and especially those who are likely to seek teaching positions in schools that most closely mirror their own circumstances, will not be prepared to serve all students.

The final theme, that of experiential learning, is evident in the fact that both teacher candidates and cooperating teachers felt that, despite the hurdles, candidates learned more by being in the schools. One teacher remarked that "they need to know the truth. Nobody tells you the truth." Another said "we think they learn way more being here than they do back in their classrooms." It is as if the challenges and successes our emerging PDS model experienced mirror those that exist between theory and practice too; there is always space between what we learn about how classrooms should work and the realities of classroom life. This benefit is the best evidence of the unique opportunities for customized, professional development as described in Essential #3. Candidates enjoyed the flexibility to "go off and visit the cafeteria or ISS (in-school suspension) or sit with the guidance counselor during a Rule 20 meeting." Real experiences had by teachers and students in middle schools had a notable effect on our candidates' learning.

Going Forward Using the Lessons Learned

By documenting our experiences in the beginning stages of the PDS implementation, we gained valuable insight to help us make informed improvements to our partnerships. Several changes have been made in more recent semesters based on the results of this study. These include simple changes such as lengthening the time we visit classrooms during class sessions and participating in more science and literacy nights offered by our Professional Development Schools. One of the initiatives we are proudest of included co-coordinating an EdCamp, a type of "un-conference" with teachers from all over our county that was held on a Saturday morning at School A. This model of professional development is organized around topics of interest solicited from teachers the morning of the workshop, so it is responsive to self-identified teacher needs.

Perhaps the most effective change was a major revision to our content area literacy course. Rather than utilize the 20-minute breakout times during class meetings, this time is condensed into a three-week "literacy strategy circles" exercise, wherein teacher candidates plan 45-minute content literacy lessons to teach to 7th and 8th graders who come to our classroom. Candidates take turns in trios collaboratively planning and delivering "before reading," "during reading," and "after reading" lessons. While the 8th grade lesson is taught, the candidates who are working with 7th grade observe their peers, and while the 7th grade lesson is taught, the candidates working with 8th grade observe their peers. Also, the candidates' actual classroom teachers observe and leave feedback.

At the end all teacher candidates deliver feedback to one another based on what they observed and reflect on what went well and what they would do differently. This supported planning, delivery, and reflection helps scaffold all candidates' proficient practice with content literacy. Additionally, this exercise creates expectations for collaboration, observation and feedback that we hope stays with our candidates well into their teaching careers. Classroom teachers seemed happy (as evidenced by their movement around the room and that they took notes) to be asked to not only participate, but to give feedback to the developing teacher candidates.

We have learned the importance of "buy-in" and expertise from the cooperating teachers chosen for placements. In our early stages, we experienced principals who told all faculty that they were required to have a teacher candidate placed in their rooms, if needed. Consequently, some teacher candidates had less than positive experiences during those weeks. We now explain to the principals the needs we have for placements and the importance of a willing and effective cooperating teacher. Similarly, course instructors now attend a faculty meeting to meet all the faculty and explain the purposes of the PDS partnership rather than just meeting with the administration.

As the results suggest, communication is a critical area necessary for a successful PDS. Some ways we have improved communication more recently include providing class dates along with class topics during the short visits during class to collaborating teachers at the beginning of the semester so that these teachers understand the reasons for the teacher candidate visits. For example, we let them know that teacher candidates will be looking for examples of "differentiation" or "social development" during their class visits. Another way of improving communication we implemented is scheduling regular meetings with principals to discuss the effectiveness of the PDS relationship for all parties involved as the semester progresses rather than just before each semester.

As for communication with our teacher candidates, course instructors now give more explicit explanations about the information candidates should be ready to discuss related to course content when they return from class visits. For example, for a course on the nature and needs of young adolescents, the instructor provides sample statements as examples of connecting course content to classroom visits, such as, "Caleb experiences the 'imaginary audience' we have read about when he reads in front of the class and acts very nervous and shy."

Conclusion

We approached our study with the expectation that hearing teachers' and candidates' voices would reveal challenges, successes, and opportunities faced in our emerging professional development schools. We conclude that the benefits our teacher candidates and the classroom teachers experienced outweigh the challenges that were faced. Successes occurred on personal levels, between teachers and candidates and candidates and middle school students. These interpersonal experiences were rewarding, and when weighed against our more traditional alternative, the university classroom, taught richer and deeper lessons about what it means to be a teacher. The challenges stem mostly from issues related to planning, organization, and communication. Our study has helped us to better understand how these foundational elements form a framework within which the real-world interactions take place. The healthier and sturdier this framework is, the more useful and educative the interactions will be.

There is something invaluable about university faculty teaching future teachers inside of schools as opposed to in college classrooms. Eliminating the distance between those who research and talk about teaching middle school and those who teach middle school has the potential to add genuine and practical accountability to everyone's work. Future research could survey the candidates who participated in this model a few years into their careers to determine whether they are able to more effectively persist through challenges faced by all teachers. Our study demonstrates that the time required to establish healthy relationships, expectations, roles, and norms for all participants is not wasted. These are essential investments of time and interactions.

Our study also made clear that a healthy PDS will indeed yield benefits to all parties, not only the teacher candidates who are able to learn in more authentic settings. Embedding course content into the actual schools helps reflect what is actually happening in classrooms against what research says is best for middle school students. One of our cooperating teachers helped make this point very clearly: "It was very eye-opening to see how far off we are from the ideal middle school. It was a good experience, but a sad one, as well." Currently, our partnership can be described as 'developing" according to NCATE's stages (NCATE, 2010). Our efforts and data encourage us that we should continue to define those characteristics outlined in the Nine Essentials. SUP

Appendix A

PDS Middle School Teacher Focus Group

The purpose for us being here today is to just ask a couple of focus group questions so that we can compile all of your feedback. I will just ask some questions and you guys can just respond.

Q1: The first thing we need to know is, just by a show of hands, how many of you went through a traditional teacher prep program vs an alternative teacher prep program?

Q2: Now just your general thoughts about what it means to do a professional development school versus a traditional university classroom-based teacher preparation.

Q3: What this is sort of a revision to the way we've been doing it, which is where we meet on campus and we send them out to the school for five weeks. Now we are trying to be in the classroom for all of our class meetings, and like what you're saying, they have a lot more face to face time with kids, they see class changes. And the reality of that, like the disappointment when you plan an awesome lesson and we're all just to just soar out of here and it turns out that nobody, it didn't connect with anybody. Well, let me just make sure that you know too. We want to know that anything negative, while this is all wonderful to hear and you feel like it makes a big difference in the labs of our candidates, but maybe not negative. What could be done differently or what was challenging.

Q4: How do you feel that our students impacted or influenced your students in the classes?

Appendix B

Teacher Candidate Focus Group Questions

In what ways did your experience this semester vary from your expectations of what it would be like to take education courses?

When you first joined the program, what was your preference for teaching style - would you have preferred traditional approach vs. experiential learning?

After completing a semester in the program, what is preference now?

In your opinion, has this experience been more intense or less intense (or same) then what you would expect in a traditional teaching format?

For those who had taken education courses previously, how was this experience different?

What were some challenges associated with taking college courses at a middle school? What were some advantages associated with taking college courses at a middle school?

How, if at all, has the experience of completing your course work within an actual middle school benefited you? (as a student, professional, etc.)

In what ways did the school environment (climate, culture, etc.?) shape your experiences?

In what ways do you feel you were able to have a positive impact on the students as a result of being in their school?

What surprised you about the students, teachers, and school as a whole?

What should stay the same for the next time we hold courses at a middle school? What should change?

What were the overall benefits for you for learning in this type of program? (if any)

What were the overall disadvantages for you for learning in this type of program? (if any)

Describe how often you see your professors face-to-face. How do you feel about the amount of contact you have with them?

Probe: How has the amount of contact with your professor influenced your level of comfort with learning new material?

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