

# NAPDS Trends and Themes: Data From the National Association of Professional Development Schools Annual Meetings, 2002–2014

James M. Shiveley, Miami University  
Gavin Pond, Miami University

## Introduction

The concept of a Professional Development School (PDS) is not recent phenomenon. While stemming from the work of the Holmes Partnership and National Network of Educational Renewal in the 1980s and 1990s, many of the concepts of the PDS may be traced back to the work of John Dewey's Lab School in Chicago and later the creation of university lab schools for teacher education (Colburn 1993; Holmes Group 1993; Zenkov, Shiveley & Clark 2016). A recent themed special issue of *School-University Partnerships* focused on the question, "What is a PDS?" indicating that the answer to this question is far from universally held and calls for more discussion to help frame PDS work within a more commonly held set of criteria (Zenkov et al., 2016). While there is no single definition of a PDS, it is typically a K-12 school that has entered into some form of agreement with a university to better prepare future teachers, promote the professional development of practicing teachers, and serve as sites for educational research (Sykes, 1997). Over a quarter of a century ago the Holmes Group articulated four primary objectives of PDSs: to improve the training of pre-service teachers, to enhance the achievement of PK-12 students, to conduct research on and by school and university educators on PK-12 and teacher education curricula and practices, and to provide professional development for all of the constituents of these partnerships (Holmes Group, 1990).

A more recent outgrowth of the Professional Development School movement has been an annual national conference dedicated to sharing and showcasing the work of various schools and universities engaged in PDS work. The University of South Carolina in Columbia originated and sponsored the National Professional Development School Conference from 2000 until 2015. During this time the membership of the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS), a national organization for schools and universities engaged school-university partnerships, would meet annually at this conference and participate as co-hosts. In 2016, NAPDS held its first conference as a separate event.

This paper examines the presentations given at the National Professional Development School Conference over a 13-year period from 2002 through 2014. It was during this time that the conference was firmly established as a national outlet for sharing

the work and research being conducted in PDS settings throughout the country.

## Purpose and Research Questions

University faculty and school personnel of Professional Development Schools are, no doubt, constantly engaged in collaboration and various types of professional development workshops at the local level. However, an additional and logical place to share new ideas, engage in debate on how PDS work is defined and implemented, and to share the ongoing research in this field, would be at the annual conference of the National Association of Professional Development Schools. The vision of the NAPDS is to "serve as an advocate for the educational community that is dedicated to promoting the continuous development of collaborative school/higher education/community relationships and to create and sustain genuine collaborative partnerships between P-12 and higher education" (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2017). The initial goals of the National Association for Professional Development Schools included: establishing a leadership structure that cut across the educational continuum; developing and maintaining a members only website for PDS resources and dialogue; creating and disseminating a regular newsletter to share announcements, news, and best practice; creating a national journal to allow PDS practitioners to share their work; and, collaborating with the University of South Carolina in co-sponsoring the annual PDS national conference (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2017). It is the study of this last goal that we focus in this paper.

The NAPDS annual conference is attended by classroom teachers, university educators, university pre-service candidates, and school administrators. The conference provides research reports and workshops on topical issues, curriculum development, and strategies related to the development of professional development schools. In this regard, the NAPDS annual conference may be seen as a reflection of the current topics and key areas of debate among those engaged in PDS work around the country. What would an examination of these topics reveal about the nature of the work being done in PDS environments?

Our approach to addressing this question was to conduct a content analysis of the number and types of sessions provided at the NAPDS annual conference. Similar studies have been done in other professional organizations to describe national trends in particular fields (Al-Saleh, 1996; Krider & Ross, 1999; Smith, 1984; VanFossen & Shiveley, 2003). Using session abstracts, this study examined the topics presented at sessions held during the NAPDS annual conferences from 2002-2014. Specific questions investigated fell into three categories: Number of Presentations; Topics; and Trends and Changes in Types of Sessions.

- Number of Presentations: Over a 13-year period, including the early years of the NAPDS annual conference, how has the conference grown in terms of the number and variance of the presentations given?
- Topics: What types of topics were presented and discussed in these presentations? To what extent do the types of sessions align with the various categories that have traditionally defined PDS work?
- Trends and Changes in Types of Sessions: How have the types of conference sessions changed over the years? Have the topics presented remained constant or have new topics emerged or old topics disappeared? What trends have emerged in the types or categories of topics presented?

## Methods

In order to answer the research questions posed in this study, and to determine what, if any, trends might be identified, we employed a content analysis technique. Wright (1986) defined content analysis as a technique for:

systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories. It may require quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis or both...it requires that the categories of classification and analysis be clearly and operationally defined so that other researchers can follow them reliably...so that independent coders are likely to agree. It is important to remember, however, that content analysis itself provides no direct data about the nature of the communicator, audience, or effects. Therefore, great caution must be exercised whenever this technique is used for purposes other than classification, description and analysis of the manifest content of the communication (pp. 125-126).

Content analysis is particularly appropriate for analyzing print communications for trends or for making historical comparisons (Berger, 2000) and content analysis techniques have been used to determine trends in professional fields as diverse as performance and instruction, communications and technology and experiential learning (Al-Saleh, 2000; Krider & Ross, 1999; Smith, 1984). For example, Krider and Ross (1999) conducted a theme analysis of programs from the annual

meetings of the National Communication Association (NCA) from 1993 through 1998. The NCA programs were analyzed and five categories or themes emerged. Krider and Ross concluded that this methodology allowed them to answer research questions about trends in experiential learning presentations at NCA meetings, which was the primary impetus for their study.

In employing content analysis for the current study, we heeded Wright's (1986) caution not to stray from analysis of the manifest content alone—in this case, the NAPDS session abstracts. We did so with full understanding of the 'words and deeds' phenomenon (Deutscher, 1966) in which the abstract of a conference presentation may be one thing and the actual presentation is something altogether different – a fact anyone who has regularly attended annual conferences can attest to. However, in conducting this content analysis we made the assumption that the individuals giving the presentation intended to discuss the topic as provided in the conference abstract and that the topic as laid out in the conference abstract was deemed important enough to prepare for presentation. The sample size for this analysis was every general session topic presented between the years 2002 and 2014.

## Categories for Analysis

Once the sample had been agreed upon, we then developed initial categories of analysis for session focus and then met to discuss and resolve differences in these initial categories. For this study, several approaches were considered to determine categories for session abstract analysis. One was to place session abstracts into one of the Nine Essentials of PDS as defined by the National Association of Professional Development Schools. These 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; and

9. Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures. (National Association of Professional Development Schools, 2017 <http://napds.org/nine-essentials/>)

We ultimately decided against this approach because often sessions were submitted to the conference with a pre-determination of which of these Essentials the session best fit. We wanted to take more of an outsiders approach the content analysis. We therefore relied instead on the early PDS literature that focused on how to define a PDS. Five broad session categories emerged from this literature review: improving preservice teacher education programs; conducting inquiry in a PDS setting; professional development of faculty in schools and universities working in a PDS; the impact of the PDS on K-12 student learning; and the overall structure of how a PDS was set up and maintained (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Holmes, 1990; Zenkov et al., 2016). In addition to these five broad categories, we anticipated that our coding would allow for additional categories to emerge.

We then began to “work back and forth between the data and the classification system to verify the accuracy of the system” (Patton, 1990, p. 403). NAPDS conference titles and abstracts from 2002-2014 were analyzed and coded, and in the process, three additional categories emerged. Each session was then coded with one or two primary topics from these final eight categories. One result of this coding process is that in any given year there were always more topics presented than the total number of session abstracts found in the conference programs, since some sessions included more than one topic. Sessions coded as 7 were typically self-story case studies that contained more than two primary topics, and were consequently not dual coded. The final eight categories were:

1. Improving Teacher Preparation Programs – Sessions were coded as 1 when the primary purpose was methods, practices, and/or recommendations for improving the quality of preservice teacher candidate education. Such sessions might focus on teacher preparation program curriculum, building relationships with a PDS to improve the teacher candidate learning experiences, engaging teacher candidates in action research or co-teaching projects during field experiences, or more effectively evaluating teacher preparation outcomes.
2. Promoting Professional Development – Sessions were coded as 2 when the primary focus was enabling inservice teachers in PDSs and/or University Faculty to improve professional practice. While the ultimate goal of these is always to improve K-12 student and/or preservice teacher learning, in sessions coded as 2 that goal is reached indirectly through improving the practices/competencies of inservice teachers and/or university faculty through skill/knowledge development.

3. Inquiry – Sessions were coded as inquiry when the primary focus was research on any topic conducted by university faculty and/or school faculty designed to contribute knowledge about the functioning and/or impact of PDSs. Sessions focused on developing theoretical and practical approaches to PDS research are also included in this category; for example, a session focused on training participants to evaluate PDSs through effective research design. Finally, conferences focused on developing preservice and in-service teachers’ reflection and research skills by having them conduct a research study (e.g. action research), were also coded as inquiry.
4. Improving K-12 Student Learning – Sessions were coded as 4 that involved practices designed to directly impact K-12 student outcomes. While the goal of all coded sessions is ultimately to improve K-12 education, only sessions that focused on a specific practice or set of practices the primary stated goal and hoped for immediate direct effect was the improvement of K-12 learning outcomes.
5. Structure and Organization of PDS – Sessions were coded as 5 that focused on issues such as formalized planning and decision-making structures, and the nature of formal relationships, contracts, and MOUs between PDSs and partner Universities.
6. Community/Family Involvement – Sessions coded as 6 focused on practices to improve integration of families and communities into the PDS and/or PDS/university partnership. Examples include specific partnerships involving third parties as well as informal relationships built through community/family-focused practices.
7. Multi-topic Case Studies – Sessions were coded as 7 whose primary focus was a narrative of a particular PDS relationship designed to draw conclusions and pose questions across a variety of domains that arose from a holistic analysis of problems, successes, and failures directly experienced as a result of attempts by participants to build, maintain, or modify a PDS/University/(community) partnership. It was typical in such sessions that 3 or more of the prior categories listed above were infused throughout the session in such a way as to make the claim that a session in this category dealt primarily with any particular one. Sessions categorized in this category therefore were not included in the total number or percentage of the other topics, but were kept separate as a category.
8. Other – Sessions were coded as 8 which fit into none of the above categories, or which the topic of the session was not clear from the abstract.

## Findings

The findings from this study are organized into the number total of sessions and topics presented (see Table 1) and the breakdown

Table 1. NAPDS Seminar Topics by Year

	Year												
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1	19	30	40	41	49	78	103	95	114	89	170	179	157
2	13	14	18	16	11	24	40	67	57	49	37	52	56
3	20	23	32	38	56	60	53	45	64	39	57	85	83
4	11	22	25	21	34	44	61	44	73	65	74	93	90
5	6	2	4	10	4	11	29	10	21	3	1	6	10
6	2	1	3	3	4	7	5	5	8	12	7	6	5
7	20	25	53	37	48	61	53	60	31	57	43	22	21
8	11	18	22	29	30	24	35	33	25	41	24	35	37
Total abstracts that year	83	113	165	166	189	239	302	275	294	288	325	365	336
Total Topics	102	135	197	195	236	309	379	359	393	355	413	478	459

Topic Legend

- 1 - Enhancing/Promoting/Improving Teacher Preparation Programs
- 2 - Promoting Professional Development for Teachers and/or University Faculty
- 3 - Inquiry
- 4 - Improving K-12 student learning or impacting the K-12 student experience
- 5 - Structural/Organizational
- 6 - Community/family partnerships/involvement
- 7 - Multi-topic case study/studies
- 8 - Other/General/Unclear from abstract

of sessions by topic or theme presented in terms of percentage of overall presentations (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

**Total Number of Sessions and Topics Presented**

Several points emerge from a review of the number and categories of sessions presented at the NAPDS conferences since 2002. The first is the steady growth that occurred in the sessions presented over this 13-year span (see Table 1). The first year of this study shows only 83 total sessions presented. The next six

years (2003-2008) indicate growth in the number of sessions at the conference each year, with a high of 302 in 2008, before showing a drop-off in 2009. This represents a growth of 364% in just six years. The following six years (2009- 2014) show a initial slight decline in sessions to 275 (9% decrease), followed by steady overall growth in the number of sessions to 294, 288, 325, 365, and 336 respectively. When one looks at the number of PDS topics presented at these conferences, a similar growth trend may be seen, with topic totals ranging from 102 in 2002, to 459

Table 2. Percentage of Each Seminar Topic by Year

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1	18.6%	22.2%	20.3%	21.0%	20.8%	25.2%	27.2%	26.5%	29.0%	25.1%	41.2%	37.4%	34.2%
2	12.7%	10.4%	9.1%	8.2%	4.7%	7.8%	10.6%	18.7%	14.5%	13.8%	9.0%	10.9%	12.2%
3	19.6%	17.0%	16.2%	19.5%	23.7%	19.4%	14.0%	12.5%	16.3%	11.0%	13.8%	17.8%	18.1%
4	10.8%	16.3%	12.7%	10.8%	14.4%	14.2%	16.1%	12.3%	18.6%	18.3%	17.9%	19.5%	19.6%
5	5.9%	1.5%	2.0%	5.1%	1.7%	3.6%	7.7%	2.8%	5.3%	0.8%	0.2%	1.3%	2.2%
6	2.0%	0.7%	1.5%	1.5%	1.7%	2.3%	1.3%	1.4%	2.0%	3.4%	1.7%	1.3%	1.1%
7	19.6%	18.5%	26.9%	19.0%	20.3%	19.7%	14.0%	16.7%	7.9%	16.1%	10.4%	4.6%	4.6%
8	10.8%	13.3%	11.2%	14.9%	12.7%	7.8%	9.2%	9.2%	6.4%	11.5%	5.8%	7.3%	8.1%

Topic Legend (Tables 1 and 2)

- 1 - Enhancing/Promoting/Improving Teacher Preparation Programs
- 2 - Promoting Professional Development for Teachers and/or University Faculty
- 3 - Inquiry
- 4 - Improving K-12 student learning or impacting the K-12 student experience
- 5 - Structural/Organizational
- 6 - Community/family partnerships/involvement
- 7 - Multi-topic case study/studies
- 8 - Other/General/Unclear from abstract

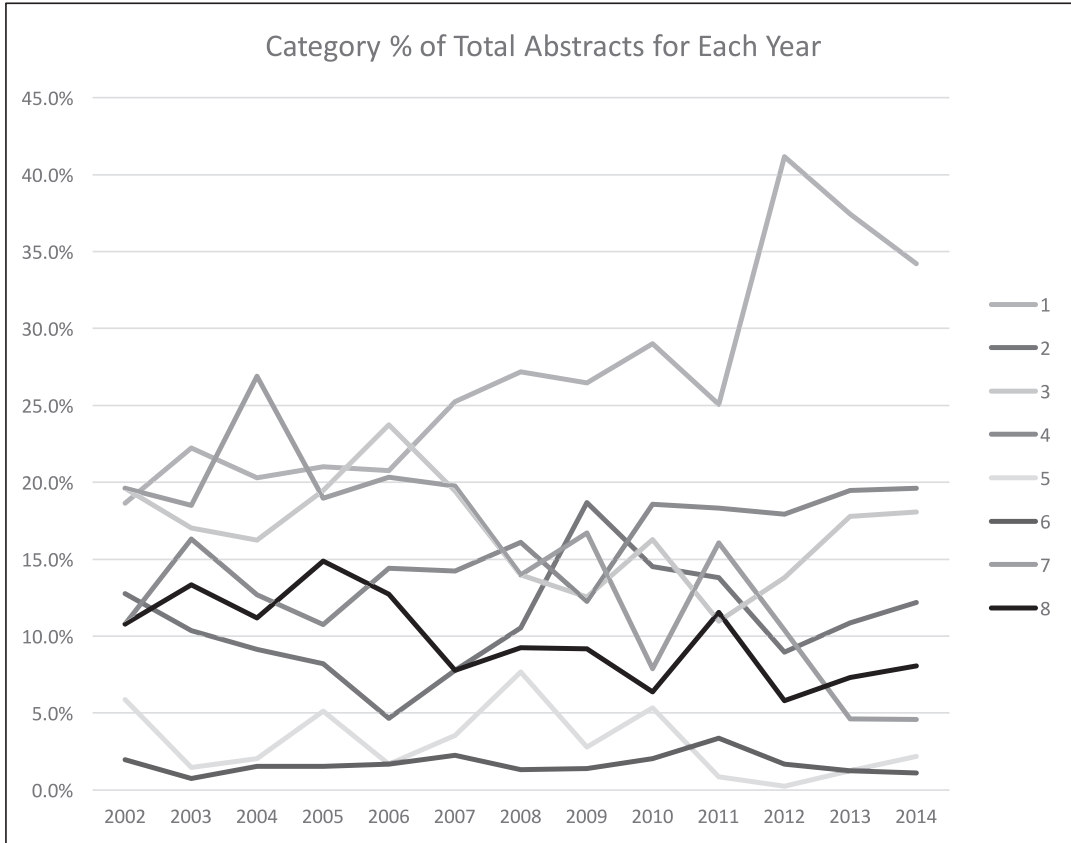


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in 2014. Again, the increase in topic numbers was steady and strong from 2002 until 2008 (102 to 379), followed by a brief dip in 2009 to 359, with increases again from 2010 through 2014. While it is impossible to say why there was a decrease in participation following the year 2008, this time period corresponded with the national recession, which put restrictions on many university and school budgets.

A second finding from a study of the topics presented is there are shifts in certain categories of topics presented. Although one can see an increase in the total number of topics presented in each category of session abstracts, this growth was uneven. Some categories grew significantly in the number of sessions presented while others show very little growth. The sessions dealing with *Structure and Organization* of a PDS (category 5), *Community/Family Involvement* (category 6), or *Multi-topic Case Studies* (category 7), remained essentially the same in terms of the total number of sessions presented over the 12-year span. However, the number of sessions dealing with

*Inquiry* or *Promoting Professional Development* quadrupled (20 to 83 and 13 to 56 respectively) and those sessions dealing with *Improving K-12 Student Learning* increased by eight-fold. Finally, by 2014 there was more than 13 times the number of sessions that included *Improving Teacher Education Programs* as one of the primary topics than there were in 2002.

### Percentage of Sessions Presented by Category

Table 2 represents the *percentage* that each theme or focus area contributed to that year's total number of sessions. If one assumes that the topics being presented at a national conference reflect in some way the value placed on the work that is being done in a PDS setting, this data can provide some insight on the relative importance of a theme to the PDS community in any given year. Similarly, any major shifts in the percentage of particular theme over time may demonstrate a waning or waxing of a topic in the PDS community. With this in mind, two



significant trends emerge from a close look at these data. Certain themes remained fairly constant as a percentage of total sessions presented. Those sessions dealing with the *Structure and Organization* (category 5) or *Community/Family Involvement* (category 6) remained fairly constant and low in terms of percentage of total sessions presented, ranging between 1% and 8% most years. Similarly, the themes of *Promoting Professional Development* (category 2) and *Inquiry* (category 3) remained fairly constant over the years, ranging around 10% to 20% the total number of sessions presented in most years. The themes of *Improving Teacher Education Programs* (category 1) and *Improving K-12 Student Learning* (category 4) both almost doubled as a percentage of total sessions in later years when compared to the earliest years.

The second point one can draw from the data is that there has been a slight shift from a relatively equal emphasis among the eight categories in this study in 2002 to a distribution of themes more weighted toward only four of the eight themes. In 2002, none of the topics represented more than 19.6% of the total topics presented. The top four topics of *Improving Teacher Education Programs*, *Promoting Professional Development*, *Inquiry*, and *Improving K-12 Student Learning* accounted for 70% of the total topics discussed. By 2014, those same topics accounted for 84% of the total, with the remaining four topics accounting for less than 10% of the total each. Figure 1 shows the shifts in percentage of topics presented over the 13-year period.

## Discussion

One of the points that strike us from the content analysis of the NAPDS sessions is the overall strength and usefulness the NAPDS conference has as an outlet for sharing and disseminating information related to PDS work around the country. The participation in the conference quadrupled as measured in terms of sessions and topics presented over the time period studied. These sessions are almost always jointly presented by teams of faculty from both school and university settings. As anyone involved in this type of work would attest, there is no one-way to create, foster, support, and grow a PDS. The NAPDS annual conference provides an ideal setting to share ongoing research, lessons learned, and variations of approach, as well as to discuss mutual challenges and successes on a face-to-face real time basis. As noted earlier, since the last year of analysis (2014) the conference split so that there are now two national conferences dealing explicitly with the issues associated with the work of Professional Development Schools.

Secondly, an examination of the percentage of topics addressing certain themes, as well as the shifts of these topics over time can be revealing. For example, the topics of *Improving Teacher Preparation Programs* and *Inquiry* have always been two of the top topics discussed at the NAPDS annual conference, with *Improving Teacher Preparation Programs* clearly being the most discussed at the most recent conference of this study. One hypothesis for this would be to suggest that the university agenda and university faculty primarily drive many of the session topics.

This thought is based on the premise that teacher preparation and *research* are two areas closely related to the promotion and tenure incentives for many university faculty. While it must be noted that teacher preparation and inquiry are and have always been important aspects of K-12 school faculty and administrators, particularly in a PDS school, the reward structure of K-12 settings are not established as directly toward those ends. One could also argue that these two topics are primary simply because, at a PDS site, these agenda items represent a key overlap in goals important to both universities and K-12 schools.

It is also noteworthy that the top four topics most commonly discussed at the annual conference, those of *Improving Teacher Education Programs*, *Promoting Professional Development*, *Inquiry*, and *Improving K-12 Learning* are all in line with the four major criteria established decades ago to define a PDS in the literature stated in the introduction section of this paper (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Holmes, 1990; Zenkov et al., 2016). These four topics remained near the top of percentage of topics presented throughout the years of this study, and, by 2014 represented over 84% of the total. Over the course of this study, this focus became clearer at the “expense” of sessions that were less clearly defined (categories 7 and 8). *Multi-topic Case Studies* involving three or more key topics ranged from 20% to 27% of the total conference topics during the early conference years, but eventually declined from a high of 26.9% in 2003, to under 5% of the topic total in 2013 and 2014. This may be an indication that as the conference grew and the PDS movement matured, there were fewer case study sessions devoted to telling the story of the start up work. Similarly, over time one sees fewer sessions in which the abstract fell into the *Other* category, defined as “general or unclear.”

A final finding that merits discussion from this study was the general lack of dialogue on two of the topics that were included in this content analysis. The number of sessions dealing with the *Structure/Organization of a PDS* and with the *Community/Family Involvement* in a PDS, never garnered a percentage of total topics discussed above 5.9%. Why are these numbers so low? One obvious guess is that neither of these topics warrant much attention in the PDS community. Or perhaps, these topics have just not been seen as relevant or interesting to present at a national conference on Professional Development Schools. Another reason is that discussions of the structure of a PDS were often included in presentations that were placed in category 7 (*Multi-topic Case Studies*) and was therefore not included again in category 5 (*Structure & Organization of a PDS*). Regardless, we believe that the organizational structure of how a PDS is set up and maintained and how key decisions are made by key participants are a key factor in successful PDS development (Abdal-Haqq, 1998) and should warrant more discreet attention, study, and discussion. Similarly, the contributions of community and family partnerships within a PDS structure are critical (Officer, Grim, Medina, Bringle, & Foreman, 2013; Burns, Jacobs, Baker, & Donahue, 2016) and remain a potentially untapped resource for many Professional Development Schools. It will be interesting to note

in future years if either of these topics become more widely discussed in future years.

## Limitations and Conclusions

There are a number of key limitations to this report. One is that the focus of this study remained exclusively on the printed abstracts found in the conference proceeding of each year. No analysis was made of the keynote speakers or the roundtable presentations at each conference, both of which would have been rich additional sources of information. This was done because the session abstracts represented by far the largest category of conference data and our time constraints required us to simplify our study. However, we have no doubt that the inclusion of these additional data sources would have enhanced the findings. Similarly, our study does not include those sessions that were submitted, but not accepted, by the conference committee. Another limitation is that in conducting the content analysis for the current study, we assumed that people submitted NAPDS session proposals (of which the published abstract was a required portion) based on what they *wanted* to present or what they *believed* they would be presenting at the time the proposal was written. As noted earlier, though some individuals may very well have presented entirely something different at the NAPDS annual meeting. It was only the manifest content presented in the abstract with which this study dealt.

The annual conference of any professional learned society is often a rich and stimulating opportunity for key participants in a given field to come together to share ideas and disseminate research findings. Such conferences can also provide a window into the shifting values and trends of a movement or organization. Groups and individuals typically submit proposals to present, which are subsequently vetted by a panel of experts for approval. As such, what is ultimately presented at a national conference may be considered to be a reflection of that organization's beliefs of what is interesting and relevant to be shared to the organizations national membership.

We conducted a content analysis of the session abstracts of the national annual conference of the National Association of Professional Development Schools during the initial years of its development, placing these session abstracts into 1 of 8 categories. This study quantified a steady rise in conference presentations over a 12-year span, indicating a growing scope of interest and participation among schools and universities in PDS work. Also of interest was a gradual coalescing of topics that were similar to the original objectives of a PDS, as set forth by the Holmes Group (1990). We also found the lack of representation in conference sessions on topics dealing with

school organization or community engagement curious, and worthy of further investigation. <sup>SUP</sup>

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