Creating a Professional Development School:

Processes of Renewal

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Abstract:

This article describes the establishment of a professional development school. It examines how such an effort took place through discussing the reflections of the cooperating teachers who worked with pre-service master’s candidates in striving to provide a nurturing and equitable education for all their students. This partnership revealed that teachers care for their students and are ultimately motivated by their successes and academic growth. As such, there was evidence the PDS helped to nurture renewal in this setting, suggesting it was a positive influence on both teachers and students.
1. Introduction

The challenges of simultaneously meeting legislated benchmarks while fostering democratic classrooms and honoring students as individuals is a difficult balance for schools, particularly those in high-needs urban districts. The demands of No Child Left Behind and the expectation to meet Adequate Yearly Progress have only compounded the problem. Colorado State University and Adams 14 School District, the latter a high-need, urban setting, have recently established a Professional Development School (PDS) Partnership. With a genuine commitment to improving the overall wellness of the district and preparing exceptional teacher candidates, the partnership completed its inaugural year with exceptional success. This article describes the efforts to establish this PDS, using the reflections of the cooperating teachers who worked with pre-service master's candidates to provide a nurturing and equitable education for all their students as a basis for analysis. The PDS revealed that below the surface of stress and regulations are teachers who care for their students and are ultimately motivated by their successes and academic growth. There was then evidence that the PDS is helping to nurture renewal in this setting, and as result, that it is having a positive influence on both teachers and students.

1.1 Background

The partnership between the Adams 14 School District and Colorado State University’s School of Teacher Education and Principal Preparation (STEPP) was the result of a meeting at the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) Summer Institute (2007). Administrators from Adams 14 recognized strong math and science candidates consistently coming out of the STEPP program. Colorado State University (CSU), as a member of the NNER, has a long and successful history of establishing and maintaining successful PDS partnerships, yet has been constrained by geographic boundaries from having these partnerships in high need and diverse settings. At the time, STEPP had just completed the first year of an accelerated, one year master’s and licensure cohort-based program in northern Colorado. A partnership with Adams 14 offered an opportunity for CSU to add an additional cohort where students could work in an urban, high-needs district. With a commitment to focus recruitment efforts on math and science candidates, the program would also fulfill the district’s need for more quality candidates in those
1.2 Research Questions

As Colorado State University’s School of Education examined the development and implementation of a PDS between Adams 14 School District and C.S.U., these questions were focused on in helping to guide reflection:

1. How can we serve the needs of Adams 14 teachers and students?
2. How do we best prepare new teachers?
3. As you reflect on your experiences in your first year, what preparation do you wish you had?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This article focuses on a PDS between Adams 14 School District, a public school system concerned with teaching students in grades K-12, and Colorado State University’s School of Education, a public school dealing with educating pre-service teachers.

2.1.1 Adams 14 School District

The Adams 14 School District is located just outside of the Denver Metro area in Commerce City, Colorado. Buttressed by rail yards, the interstate, and a former military arsenal, Commerce City is an industrial area which, until very recently, has remained immune to suburban growth. It is a diverse community; the school district reports 55 percent of its student body as English Language Learners. Although the Adams 14 School District is relatively small, supporting only one traditional high school and two middle schools, it has one of the highest free-and-reduced lunch rates in the state. The Adams 14 school district has not met Adequate Yearly Progress for several years, resulting in academic watch and a state audit. The district has been plagued by high teacher and administrative turnover as well.

2.1.2 Colorado State University

In 2008, Colorado State University received a No Child Left Behind Improving Teacher Quality Start-up Grant to develop a PDS partnership with Adams 14. As the start-up grant was implemented, program administrators focused
on empowering teachers and allowing for site decisions while staying within the university framework.

2.1.3 The Partnership between Adams 14 School District and C.S.U.

In-service teachers and administrators were invited to a retreat in May of 2009 to organically develop the program (Dittmer, 1996). The retreat allowed for both university and school district personnel to collaboratively plan for the implementation of the PDS. The in-service teachers at the retreat represented a spectrum of experience from within Adams 14 school district. The group included several first-year teachers who had completed their student teaching at Adams 14, third and fourth year teachers, some new to the district and some who had started teaching there, as well as several ten-to-fifteen-year veterans who had worked in the district for most of their career.

The retreat focused on two essential objectives: introducing the goals of a professional development school to the in-service teachers and developing a framework for the Adams 14 PDS to support those goals. It also was a venue that allowed for the sharing of the university’s and the school’s individual contexts. The differences in the cultures, accountability, and award structures of the school and university were communicated, which has been documented as essential to partnership success (Shiveley, 2010). The group identified the district’s professional development needs, essential program components, teacher candidate opportunities, and strategies to meet student needs. Simultaneous renewal was a central theme repeated throughout the retreat as participants focused on these questions:

1. How can we serve the needs of Adams 14 teachers and students?
2. How do we best prepare new teachers?
3. As you reflect on your experiences in your first year, what preparation do you wish you had?

Over the course of two days, this group developed the vision that guided the development of the on-site program.

2.2 Measures

Much of the data concerning the implementation of this PDS was gathered at retreats held for the in-service teachers, administrators, and C.S.U. personnel
involved in the study. It was collected using recordings and journals.

2.2.1 Graphic Recordings
Unique to the retreat experience, a graphic recorder was also present to capture the salient ideas, themes, and ideas learned from the discussions in mural form. This process became a way to create a tangible memory of the discussions and allow the participants to reconnect with their experience long after attending (artist Kriss Wittman creatively captured the different parts of the retreat; her work is displayed below).

2.2.2 Journals
The journal questions guided the reflective writing process. They included the following questions:

- Professional Goals: What aspects of teaching have you improved on this year? What areas would you like to continue working on?
- Motivations & Future Professional Learning: How can we help? What motivates you internally? Externally? What doesn’t motivate you?
- What do you envision for your future professional development? What do you envision for the staff /clinical teachers as part of our PDS?
- How can your master’s candidate help or how has a master’s candidate helped you in the past?
- Describe a time when you learned something from a colleague or a
master’s candidate and how it changed your practice.

2.3 Procedure
2.3.1 Teacher Preparation

Three central ideas aligned with the 4-part mission of NNER (found at: http://www.nnerpartnerships.org/about/mission.htm) that were unique to the new partnership emerged from participant feedback at the original retreat:

1. Pacing changes for an Action Research master's project with more cooperating teacher involvement to improve the inquiry purpose of a PDS;
2. Candidates’ spending increased one-on-one time with students through tutoring and extra-curricular experiences;
3. Exploring ways to create intentional, mentor mentee, co-teaching experiences.

The following school year, the ideas were implemented. After several weeks of intensive summer coursework, a cohort of sixteen masters’ degree candidates began their fall internship and coursework. In addition to the time candidates spent in the classroom with their cooperating teachers, the candidates’ time was also spent mentoring pre-colligate seniors, tutoring at lunch time and participating in observation rounds. Observation rounds included at least 10 teachers throughout the building, and incorporated electives and intervention classes. Candidates were required to complete structured observations and reflections that allowed for meaningful processing of the experience. They also began a year-long action research project that would culminate in their master’s degree projects.

2.3.2 Professional Development

In order to serve the professional development needs of the in-service teachers, program administrators provided a variety of opportunities, including offering an action research course, a curriculum development course, and funding for conferencing proposals. Cooperating teachers (those who were partnered with teacher candidates) also attended a co-teaching seminar designed to help teachers find new teaching styles in the classroom, utilizing pre-service teachers in ways that would have a greater impact on teacher preparation and student achievement.

However, throughout the year the professional development opportunities for practicing teachers met with limited success. While a number of teachers
throughout the district chose to participate in the courses, the general consensus throughout the district was that more teachers would have liked to take advantage of the opportunities, but felt they had a very limited amount of time to dedicate to professional growth. Pressures the teachers experienced were further compounded by the district’s walk-through initiatives and the implementation of Teach for Success (T4S), a compilation of researched-based strategies brought in by a consulting firm. The district’s expectations focused on several specific attributes, though the implementation and training times varied throughout schools in the district, resulting in varied perceptions of the program’s effectiveness.

2.3.3 Reflection

Program administrators recognized that to be effective, the approach to professional development needed to change. They also understood the importance of ongoing reflection for the continued success of the PDS (Dittmer, 1996). Therefore, as the end of the first year came to a close, a follow up retreat was held. The objective for the retreat was to provide professional development embedded with time for reflection in a positive, relaxing environment. The retreat took place in the Colorado foothills at Chautauqua Park, where the focus is on benefits such as respite, simplicity and nature (details can be found at: http://www.chautauqua.com/mission_and_values.htm).

Teachers who mentored teacher candidates (five from the middle school and seven from the high school), the middle school principal, and university faculty (the program chair, two program coordinators, office staff, and a professor) attended with the intention of reflecting on the original goals of the first retreat and the programmatic decisions born out of those goals. Most importantly, however, the retreat provided a culminating professional development opportunity for the in-service teachers to reflect on their practice over the last year. The retreat was organized into three parts: reflection, peer-coaching professional development, and identifying greatest hopes for the partnership. The reflection time constituted the bulk of the experience, including a variety of opportunities to reflect on practices and to reconnect as professional learners. These included meaningful reflection strategies, such as extended journaling time, small group discussions, and whole group share out (Short, 1997). The two days culminated with an evaluation of the retreat and an opportunity to share take-aways.
3. Results and Discussion

Through discussions (captured in the graphic recordings) and journal entries, several themes emerged. Time to talk with other teachers was very important to in-service teachers. Also, how teachers felt they were developing, along with how they were being treated, emerged as significant. While program directors had repeatedly heard from administrators that teachers were resistant to the T4S implementation, the teachers revealed their treatment was more of the issue than a feeling of disconnect between what teachers and administrators wanted. Finally, it was evident that master’s candidates impacted classroom practices and student learning, and also influenced teachers’ perceptions of themselves.

3.1 Time to talk

Time to talk with other teachers was very important to the in-service teachers. Journal entries illustrating this theme include:

“…this retreat was excellent in the fact that you get to hear what others are thinking & about more experiences other than your own.”

“[I would like] more time to investigate the more subtle aspects of T4S. More time to sit down and reflect with my clinical teaching peers on the carrying out of our mission. More time to reflect with my TC(s) about their progress, fears, etc.”

“External impact with little focus on the impact of instructional practices on students does not motivate me at all. Dialogue with peers aimed at improving instructional techniques is high motivation. I have had to seek out those opportunities this year and feel that our overall professional growth would increase more with opportunity to engage in meaningful, goal-oriented conferences.”

3.2 Development and Treatment of Teachers

3.2.1 Teachers want to Improve

Through teachers’ journal entries, it was clear they valued time to process professional learning. Themes also emerged regarding the new instructional
strategies that teachers were being asked to implement in their classroom. It was evident from the journal entries that teachers were feeling the stress of a new program implementation and, in some cases, a sense of distrust between administration and teachers, “…Right now…the lack of trust/respect between admin & staff are not motivating, and become a major distraction when trying to focus on improvement.” It was also clear that teachers were invested in improving their practice and implementing the T4S strategies. Despite these frustrations, as teachers described the need for collaborative time to process the changes being implemented, it was evident teachers valued the opportunity to improve their practice. One teacher wrote, “I am proud of the fact that I’ve implemented T4S with my students in a non-threatening, collaborative way….I need] more time to investigate the subtle aspects of T4S, more time to reflect with my clinical teaching peers on the carrying out of our mission.” The apparent disconnect between administration and staff in some areas was not related to what the teachers were being asked to do, but rather how they were involved in the process. One teacher wrote, “I am not a machine. You cannot press play & get me to ‘I do, We do, You do…’ ‘They’ want better numbers, ‘they’ want less of a turn-over, ‘they’ want high quality teachers. Reducing me to a series of heartless mechanics is not the answer. Let me first say…I see the truth of teaching now as a science. But where is the art? Being artful motivates me.” Part of what motivated teachers came from students’ improvement. One teacher wrote, “I am motivated by student success. It’s a positive cycle. Students learn and enthusiasm grows. Seeing students change in positive ways really gets me going. The challenge of creating change is what motivates me.”

3.2.2 Trusting Professionalism and seeking Student Improvement

Many journal entries revealed teachers honored the expectations of the district and the changes being implemented, but wished to be trusted to internalize the process and adapt the research-based strategies to their own setting. One teacher wrote, “What does not motivate me at all is to be a ‘template’ teacher who is forced to teach in a way that is not natural or comfortable for me.” Another teacher wrote, “I am not a machine. You cannot press play & get me to ‘I do, We do, You do…’ ‘They’ want better numbers, ‘they’ want less of a turn-over, ‘they’ want high quality teachers. Reducing me to a series of heartless mechanics is not the answer. Let me first say…I see the truth of teaching now as a science. But where is the art? Being artful motivates me.” Part of what motivated teachers came from students’ improvement. One teacher wrote, “I am motivated by student success. It’s a positive cycle. Students learn and enthusiasm grows. Seeing students change in positive ways really gets me going. The challenge of creating change is what motivates me.”
It was clear teachers needed a sense of empowerment within the classroom. This is seen in a teacher’s comment that, “What motivates me internally is to be trusted to do the job I have trained for and am passionate about without a whole series of hurdles and red tape bureaucracy. What motivates me is to try something with my students, see success, and then continue to refine and improve my methods to bring about greater success and understanding of my students. The focus on teach for success and the scrutiny of a teacher’s practice is essential to the growth of the teacher, and needs to be done in a way that empowers the teacher.”

3.2.3 Recognizing Simultaneous Renewal in the Classroom

It was also evident through the journal entries and through discussions that teacher candidates had an impact on the mentor teachers and the students of Adams City Middle School and Adams City High School. As one teacher wrote, “What I appreciate is that my M.C.s [master’s candidates] bring new ideas to the table.” There was evidence of in-service teachers getting off the “stage” and facilitating learning in different ways to meet learners’ needs, which was often attributed to the teacher candidate’s help and ideas. The journal entries revealed the many ways a pre-service teacher can add to the learning environment. This included new approaches to teaching in content areas. “The candidates that have come to me have always come in with new and fresh ideas of how to present content.” These methods included practical ideas for impacting student achievement as well, like small groups and new teaching strategies. One teacher stated, “My master’s candidate presented an idea for a collaborative team-building project. The results were phenomenal and I will be incorporating the idea into my curriculum for each class next semester.” Other teachers described how candidates were able to help with classroom management, parent communications, and grading. One teacher emphasized how their candidate had aided in implementing new technology in the classroom. Along with this, candidates also helped with small groups and tutoring, the incorporation of new and innovative ideas, and, overall, in meeting the needs of the students. As one teacher wrote, “I have become much more sensitive to how powerful such activities can be for the development of a sense of success for students of all achievement and skill levels.”
This focus on differentiation based on individual student needs was particularly important because of the constraints, expectations, and demands the teachers in this district experience.

Some teachers also described how the presence of a pre-service teacher created a metacognitive awareness in their practice. As one teacher described, “A master’s candidate becomes the running dialogue of a teacher’s internal self.” She discussed the many minute-by-minute decisions made each day, and the ways a pre-service teacher forced her to articulate, and think more about, her rationale behind those decisions. Another teacher talked about how his candidate would ask questions and take interest in why he made certain decisions in the classroom, as well as how, as a new teacher trying new ideas, this candidate’s decision making process helped him reflect. He wrote, “She has helped me enormously to remember the process of becoming an effective teacher. She has been an inspiration to me in a very trying school year.”

This final description of the pre-service teacher articulates a common theme in the journal entries, a less tangible, but equally important, aspect of the pre-service and clinical teacher relationship. Teacher candidates’ enthusiasm and commitment renewed the veteran teachers’ enthusiasm for teaching, increasing morale. As one teacher wrote, “Having an individual that feels passionately about the profession motivates me to be a better teacher myself and reminds me of my feelings at the start of my career.”

In the midst of a year filled with changes and pressures to perform, the pre-service teacher provided the opportunity for renewal by allowing cooperating teachers the opportunity to remember their own experiences as new teachers. One educator wrote, “[These candidates] are a constant reminder of the passion and raw emotion one can feel in a teacher prep program. I feel as though I grew distanced from that innocence, naiveté, newness…and as I mentor them and hear their reactions/stories, I am reminded of my own youth as an educator. Things (lessons, dailies, meetings, conversations) are so personal to them – they are sponges - they listen – they grow and learn. I love being around them and soaking up that energy. It’s very much a renewal.” If nothing else, this sense of renewal speaks of the benefits of the PDS, for in spite of all of the other issues teachers discussed, they seemed to speak at the greatest length, and the most positively, about the presence of masters’ candidates in their classrooms.
4. General Discussion

The challenges of simultaneously meeting legislated benchmarks, while fostering democratic classrooms and honoring students as individuals, is a difficult balance for schools, particularly those in high-needs urban districts, such as Adams 14 School District. No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress have only made this more difficult. A genuine commitment to improving the overall wellness of the district and preparing exceptional teacher candidates is then necessary in addressing these issues. In thinking about the implementation of a professional development school within this context, participants in the partnership between Adams 14 School District and Colorado State University’s School of Education shared “take aways” during the end-of-the-year retreat. These were one-word summaries that teachers used to define their experiences in terms of the PDS. The words they chose included: clarity, enthusiasm, pride, renewed purpose, strength, hope, and optimism. Ultimately, this sense of renewal, created by honoring teachers’ time and expertise, aided by the use of master’s candidates within these classrooms, may be the most celebrated success of the first year of this professional development school. What this means is that, despite the potential expenses, hurdles, and even extra work that implementing these types of programs has, the creation of more effective and enthusiastic teaching is worth the effort.
References

