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# Learning Our Way Through: Collaborative Self-study in an Evolving Professional Development School (PDS) Partnership

Chinwe Ikpeze

*St. John Fisher College, cikpeze@sjfc.edu*

Kathleen A. Broikou

*St. John Fisher College, kbroikou@sjfc.edu*

Sharon Christman

*St. John Fisher College*

Susan Hildenbrand

*St. John Fisher College, shildenbrand@sjfc.edu*

Cheryl Thompson

*St. John Fisher College*

*See next page for additional authors*

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# Learning Our Way Through: Collaborative Self-study in an Evolving Professional Development School (PDS) Partnership

## **Abstract**

Purpose of study: Professional development schools (PDSs) are essentially learning communities in which all participants increase their knowledge about how teaching and learning works and how best to manage the collaborative enterprise (Goodman, 2002; Horn, 2007; Mantle- Bromley, 2002; Patrizio & Gadjia, 2007; Sue, 2002). The National Council for the Accreditation of Teachers (NCATE, 2010), identified PDS as an avenue through which aspiring teachers can be provided the opportunity to integrate theory with practice. In addition, PDS partnerships serve as a vehicle for the professionalization of teachers and systematic examination and evaluation of practice. However, according to the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2008), many colleges and universities who participate in PDS partnerships do not fully understand the true meaning of PDS. This creates a void between the concept of PDS as originally proposed (Holmes Group, 1990), and the reality of the PDS as it operates in many of the partnerships (Webb-Dempsey, Steel, Shambaugh and Dampsey, 2007). In addition, while interorganizational collaboration is a PDS imperative, it remains complex, multilayered and labor-intensive for both school and university faculty (Patrizio & Gadjia, 2007; Rice & Afman, 2002; Su, 2002). This situation calls for a clear understanding of the concept of PDS as well as frequent and systematic review of the goals and objectives of PDS partnerships. The purpose of this study was to better understand one teaching college's collaborative relationship with the partner schools. The study is guided by the following questions. What was the nature of the collaboration between a teaching college and five urban-based PDSs? What were the individual and collective experiences of the faculty as well as other stakeholders in the collaboration? What factors, if any, impacted the collaboration?

## **Disciplines**

Education

## **Comments**

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## **Authors**

Chinwe Ikpeze, Kathleen A. Broikou, Sharon Christman, Susan Hildenbrand, Cheryl Thompson, and Wendy Gladstone-Brown

## **Learning Our Way Through: Collaborative Self-Study in an Evolving PDS Partnership**

### **Purpose of study**

Professional development schools (PDSs) are essentially learning communities in which all participants increase their knowledge about how teaching and learning works and how best to manage the collaborative enterprise (Goodman, 2002; Horn, 2007; Mantle-Bromley, 2002; Patrizio & Gadja, 2007; Sue, 2002). The National Council for the Accreditation of Teachers (NCATE, 2010), identified PDS as an avenue through which aspiring teachers can be provided the opportunity to integrate theory with practice. In addition, PDS partnerships serve as a vehicle for the professionalization of teachers and systematic examination and evaluation of practice. However, according to the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2008), many colleges and universities who participate in PDS partnerships do not fully understand the true meaning of PDS. This creates a void between the concept of PDS as originally proposed (Holmes Group, 1990), and the reality of the PDS as it operates in many of the partnerships (Webb-Dempsey, Steel, Shambaugh and Dampsey, 2007). In addition, while interorganizational collaboration is a PDS imperative, it remains complex, multilayered and labor-intensive for both school and university faculty (Patrizio & Gadja, 2007; Rice & Afman, 2002; Su, 2002). This situation calls for a clear understanding of the concept of PDS as well as frequent and systematic review of the goals and objectives of PDS partnerships. The purpose of this study was to better understand one teaching college's collaborative relationship with the partner schools. The study is guided by the following questions. What was the nature of the collaboration between a teaching college and five urban-based PDSs? What were the individual and collective experiences of the faculty as well as other stakeholders in the collaboration? What factors, if any, impacted the collaboration?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is informed by collaboration theory, self study research and communities of practice perspective. Collaboration (Briggs, 2007; Gadja & Koliba, 2007; Lattuca & Creamer, 2005; Patrizio & Gadja, 2007) has been identified as key to the success of PDSs. Patrizio & Gadja (2007) listed five major characteristics of collaboration. These include: existence within and across organizational boundaries, shared purpose, existence along a continuum, its developmental nature, and its relationship to the cycle of inquiry. Lattuca and Creamer (2005) emphasize the social nature of collaboration and the dynamics of interaction and relationships which constitute the foundations of practice.

Self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Dinkelman, 2003; LaBoskey, 2004) is a disciplined and systematic inquiry that values professional learning and help develop metacognition. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argues that the aim of "self-study research

is to provoke, challenge and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (p.20). Our concerns and experiences in various PDS settings motivated us to come together as a group to collectively identify, investigate, and challenge ourselves to highlight the major issues in our PDS collaboration. The work of other PDS researchers (Horn, 2007; Patrizio & Gadjia, 2007; Siebert & Britten, 2005) helped to further refine our framework.

Finally, the “communities of practice” (COP) framework (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger & Beckingham (2004) created an insight and better understanding of how collaborative inquiry is used to foster the development of temporary learning communities initiated for shared but more targeted goals such as planning, enacting, reflecting and restructuring our PDS collaboration.

### **Methods**

*Participants and context:* Data for this study were collected from a yearlong collaborative self study of a partnership between the school of Education (SoE) of a teaching college located in northeastern U.S.A and five urban-based elementary schools in the fall, 2008 and spring 2009. At the time of the study, the PDS partnership was five years old. College courses were taught in the public schools’ campuses and preservice teachers spent their field experience time working with classroom teachers or school based educators (SBEs), who served as mentors.

The primary participants were twelve faculty and staff members who were directly involved in five PDSs. The group, otherwise known as the PDS Study Group, met monthly to deliberate on our personal and collective experiences as well as those from anecdotal evidence. We also relied on research literature related to PDSs as well as the experiences of other collaborative teams (Samara, Kayler, Rigsby, Weller & Wilcox, 2006). We included other relevant stakeholders as participants in the study in recognition of the fact that the evolution of self is partly dependent on the experiences of others (Brunner, 1994). The other participants were twenty one elementary school teachers or school-based educators (SBEs) and sixty six preservice teachers. The teacher participants consisted of five males and sixteen females which included three African Americans, one Native Hawaiian and seventeen European Americans. The preservice teachers consisted of sixty-five females and one male, made up of 97% White and 3% Hispanic.

Our methodology emanated from our desire to improve the quality of our PDS collaboration and our preservice teachers’ experiences. We used the three-phase model of collaborative self-study described by Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy and Stackman (2003), as a lens to think about our study. This model consists of assessment, implementation and dissemination. During the assessment phase, we reexamined the nature of our collaborative relationships and attempted to better understand how these relationships are nurtured in our practice (Farrel, Giordano, & Weitman, 2006). The implementation phase was dominated by a discussion of the data sources that would enable us answer our research questions and increase the study’s integrity.

### **Data Sources or Evidence**

The primary data source was the written reflection of each faculty's experiences at different PDSs, recorded dialogues and conversations during the groups' monthly meeting and the interviews of each faculty member. Other sources of data included interviews of some preservice teachers and school based educators (SBEs), as well as online surveys of same participants. The survey had yes/no, open-ended and Likert type questions. The preservice teachers' survey enabled us to collect their demographic information, PDS expectations and perceptions of quality of modeling and mentoring by school teachers. The school teachers' survey elicited information about their understanding and perception of PDS, their support structure, collaboration with faculty, and professional development needs. All interview questions centered on participants' PDSs experiences, insights, challenges and suggestions for improvement.

*Data Analysis:* Data analyses were done using both deductive and inductive processes to guide both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses. We reflected on and analyzed our written reflections, dialogues, and interview data and compared deductively our experiences as co-teachers and investigators. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze data from preservice teachers and SBEs. Grounded theory is a way to generate theory from data through inductive and constant comparative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Contextual nuances are used to generate theory through participants' lived experiences. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the survey data. The interview and survey data collected from the preservice teachers and SBEs were used to triangulate those from the faculty and to add integrity to the data. Consistent with Erickson's (1986) evidentiary warrants, we met to discuss emergent themes and to share our interpretations. These were then compared to data from preservice teachers and SBEs in order to ensure 1) variety of evidence to support claims, 2) check for disconfirming evidence and, 3) discrepant cases.

### **Results/Points of view**

This study facilitated our understanding of the ideals of PDS partnerships and the realities of our own collaboration. Identifying the essential characteristics and standards of PDSs (NAECTE, 2001; NAPDS, 2008), helped us to review and assess the status of our own collaboration and to strategize for a more effective collaboration. Within the four developmental continuum of the PDS: cooperation, coordination, collaboration and coadunation (Patrizio & Gadja, 2007), we located our partnership mostly on the coordination or developing stage (NCATE, 2001). At this stage, partners are engaged in PDS in many ways but their supporting institutions have no commitment to institutionalizing the partnership through integrated strategies, joint inquiry or collective purpose (Patrizio & Gadja, 2007).

In a multiple school PDS partnership such as ours, several models exist. Each of our PDS setting was somehow unique in terms of school culture, student demographics, faculty, school initiatives, and leadership style of the principals, as well as their

experience with PDS. The leadership in each school impacted the nature of collaboration because each principal's initiatives, interests and investment in the PDS influenced the level of collaboration and the extent of cooperation between the faculty and school teachers. In some settings, the principals assigned teachers to work with preservice teachers while in other settings, teachers volunteered to work with preservice teachers. Whether teachers were assigned or volunteered to participate in the collaboration made a difference in their disposition and commitment to the partnership. Teachers who volunteered their services were more committed and willing to cooperate with faculty.

Several factors impacted our PDS collaboration. These included communication, finding time for collaboration, resistance, divergent philosophical and instructional goals, resources, process and placement. Communication was the most critical of these factors. We concluded that lack of effective communication between the principals and school teachers, faculty and school teachers, and college administration and faculty, hindered our PDS collaboration. The last factor, process and placement, was related to the way the school of education (SoE) handled the process of assigning candidates to schools and the conflict in schedule between the SoE and our partner school district.

Findings also indicate that faculty, school teachers and the preservice teachers had a parochial view of the PDS. Until we collaboratively reflected on our practice and deliberated on PDS scholarship, the faculty, staff, school administrators and teachers were unaware of the extent of commitment and collaboration required in the PDS. The focus was mainly on the improvement of teaching and learning to the exclusion of other aspects of the PDS collaboration such as systematic examination and evaluation of practice, ongoing and reciprocal professional development, as well as opportunity for joint inquiry (NAPDS, 2008).

Finally, school teachers had divergent skills sets and consequently, our preservice teachers came out of the PDS with diverse experiences. Less than 50% of the preservice teachers were satisfied with the quality of modeling and mentoring that they received. Some of the preservice teachers indicated that they gained only negative experience as they worked in classrooms where they picked up a lot of "how not to teach" lessons. In addition, faculty also had diverse experiences at different PDS sites, ranging from positive, mediocre to negative.

### **Scholarly Significance**

This study lends credence to the claim that effective collaboration is a PDS imperative and the need for stakeholders to understand what it means to be a professional development school (NAPD, 2008). By reading the experiences of a study group in an evolving PDS partnership, other PDS educators will be better informed and therefore better equipped to navigate the realities of their own PDS.

The study also highlights the need for adequate planning before a PDS partnership is instituted as well as systematic and periodic reviews (Goodman, 2002) to ensure that all stakeholders are on board to achieve the stated goals of the partnership. In addition, professional programs need a conceptual framework that will allow for the evaluation of professionals at a variety of levels.

This study contributes to the extant literature on PDSs, especially those at the initial stages of inception by highlighting some of the issues and challenges in such collaboration. Therefore, researchers interested in studying PDSs as well as colleges and universities involved in new and evolving PDS collaboration will benefit immensely from the scholarship that emanates from this study.

This study highlights the need for educators to engage in collaborative self study (CSS) in PDSs (NCATE, 2001). CSS helps PDS partners to collectively assess the state of their collaboration in relation to PDS standards. By engaging in professional learning communities, teacher educators are likely to learn and grow professionally by systematically studying and improving their practice through a cyclical process of inquiry, awareness, reflection and refinement.

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