

Strengthening the Quality of Teacher Education through School - University Partnerships

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Abstract

Professional Development Schools promote connections between schools and teacher education programs. These partnerships are thought to benefit teacher candidates, teachers, and teacher educators through promoting positive and collaborative relationships and bridging the efforts of schools and universities. In the school year 2016-2017, seven public schools and a university teacher education institute started the first complex-wide Professional Development School in Hawai'i. I explored the development of this partnership through interviews with three groups of stakeholders, observations of meetings and events, and analysis of program documents such as meeting minutes. I used the theoretical framework of Cultural-Historical-Activity-Theory and activity systems analysis to investigate these data and identify expectations, challenges, and successes of the complex-wide Professional Development School. This qualitative single-case study examined how participants interpreted and made meaning of their experiences in this partnership among the teacher education programs and the schools. Findings suggest necessary procedures as well as supporting organizational structures in the development of the partnership. Implications from the Complex-wide PDS include recommendations for PDS work in building a professional community, creating a learning culture, and forming collaborative leadership structures. This research adds to the literature addressing school improvement and student learning in Hawai'i.

Keywords: School-University Partnerships, PDS, Teacher Education, CHAT, Activity Systems Analysis

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Introduction

Professional Development Schools (PDS) promote connections between schools and teacher education programs. These partnerships are thought to benefit teacher candidates, teachers, and teacher educators through promoting positive and collaborative relationships and bridging the efforts of schools and universities (Zeichner, 2010). Members of the PDS form and shape the working relationships, and reshape the cultures of public schools, teacher education programs, and their extended communities (Levine, 2002). Though change is a continuous process, implementing change in an organization is challenging and often fails (Higgs & Rowland, 2000; Kotter, 2014). Therefore, a change in the culture of an organization and building capacity for change is seen as fundamental perspectives in this process (Higgs & Rowland, 2000). As Senge and his colleagues (2000) advised, "If you want to improve a school system, before you change the rules, look first to the ways that people think and interact together" (p.19).

In the school year 2016-2017, seven public schools and a university teacher education institute (TE) started the first Complex-wide PDS in Hawai'i. This was the first step to organize placements across one school complex and TE. All seven schools offered placements, and two teacher education programs provided teacher candidates to work with mentor teachers; on both sides, liaisons were appointed to collaborate and organize the partnership.

The purpose of this study was to explore organizational structures and individual perceptions and interactions that advanced and supported the development of this Complex-wide PDS. I explored the experiences and perceptions of the members participating in the PDS initiative, including mentor teachers, administrators from the schools and TE, and liaisons from the schools and TE. This increased dialogue among participants acknowledged challenges in the partnership and problems were seen as indicators of growth. This fostered an awareness for the partnership and a search for solutions that supported the developmental nature of the PDS (Breault, 2013; Hess-Rice, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

The Cultural-Historical-Activity-Theory (CHAT) and the activity system analysis provided the framework to identify sources of disruption, innovation, and change in the activity systems of the PDS (Engeström, 1993). CHAT theorizes how individual knowledge is acquired while the individual is in reciprocal interaction with his or her social context (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007). Using the theoretical lens of CHAT, I explored human interactions in the multifaceted learning environment of the Complex-wide PDS to capture the essence of transformation and change (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

I explore the research question: What facilitates and impedes the development of a PDS? My investigation reflected four aspects as demonstrated in Figure 1: a) the *objective* for participating and the understanding of the PDS, b) the *tools* and activities in the PDS, c) the understanding of the participants' *roles*, and d) the *division of labor* expressed in organizational structures that support and impede the development and

sustainability of the PDS. The *subjects* in this PDS specific activity system are the administrators, mentor teachers, and liaisons, each making up its own activity system.

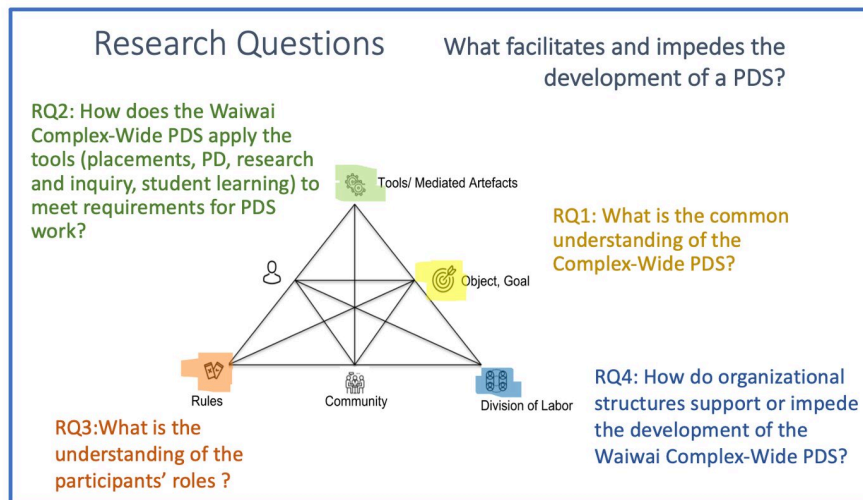


Figure 1. Activity triangle (Engeström, 1987), adapted for the Complex-wide PDS

Method

This qualitative research is a single case study bounded by time and the participating school Complex and TE programs. In the beginning stage of the PDS, participants build the foundation of a shared vision and mission that sets “the stage for planning and exploring the potential for the PDS” (Neapolitan & Tunks, 2009, p. 7). The Complex-wide PDS provided the social context and this research investigated the individual practices of the three participant groups of mentor teachers, liaisons, and administrators within it. I used a purposeful sample of convenience to recruit participants. I made efforts to have the representation distributed among schools, TE programs, and from each participant group.

Data Sources

Data were collected over the course of the first three years of the implementation of the PDS. The primary source of data were 25 interviews collected in Spring 2018 and survey data administered to the group of 42 mentors. This research explored important components such as participants’ motivation, activities, and organizational structures that may have strengthened development in this partnership. The researcher attended meetings and took field notes at various events throughout the time of 2016 to 2019. Official program documents and reports were also consulted for data.

The researcher used activity system analysis as a descriptive tool to capture the processes in organizational change and to identify systemic contradictions and tensions in the educational setting (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Data analysis unfolded in three steps. First, the researcher applied grounded theory with open and axial coding to three interview transcripts, representing each activity system to generate categories across the activity systems. These categories were used to code all interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In a second step, the researcher applied selective coding within each activity system to generate and integrate categories. In a third step, the researcher proceeded with selective coding across the three activity systems. Triangulation of

multiple sources of data, member checks and the researcher's reflection on her role as a participant observer (Angrosin, 2007) confirmed and built confidence in the quality of the evidence.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the themes aligning with the theoretical framework and provide a summary for the goals, tools, roles and organizational structures in the partnership between the school complex and the TE.

Goals

Across the three activity systems of mentor teachers, liaisons, and administrators, the participants aligned in their overall goal to improve teacher education, but they differed in their understanding of what the PDS entailed. Whereas principals and university faculty mentioned the "win-win situation for both of us, for UH students as well as our complex schools" (Principal, 2018), mentor teachers primarily defined the PDS as a school that "puts a high value on professional development as many classes are offered at the school level" (Mentor survey, 2018). Principals and mentor teachers voiced the advantage of recruiting teachers for their school and appreciated screening candidates in their daily interaction with students and staff over the period of a semester. Principals were highly satisfied with the performance of the PDS graduates and TE directors and appreciated the growing partnership and valued the in-depth experiences the university students were able to make at the school.

Five of the seven schools increased their number of placements, and three of those five schools had twelve and more student candidates placed with mentor teachers. Principals at these schools voiced a strong appreciation for the collaborative work and its impact on the school's faculty. Mentor teachers and principals valued the freshness that student teachers were bringing to their school, "the younger teachers, they might not bring the experience and some of the knowledge the experienced teachers may have but they bring a lot of enthusiasm" (Principal, 2018). The principals noticed an effect on veteran teachers, "I think it forces our teachers to up their game" (Principal, 2018). On the other hand, mentor teachers appreciated having student teachers in the classroom; despite the time teachers have to invest in planning with the student teacher, these candidates supported small group instruction, introduced new strategies, and integrated the arts. Further, mentors valued the reflection the collaborative work with the candidate required and recognized their personal improvement as teachers.

Tools

The schools in the complex have a history of collaborating with teacher training institutions. Still, the PDS is the first attempt to formalize and structure the partnership. All Principals and program directors signed a memorandum of agreement, which included guidelines for PDS work (NAPDS, 2001).

The complex superintendent and principals follow a systemic approach in school development and the unique geographical location of the complex requires collaboration among the schools; most of the elementary students attend the complex' high school. Principals initiate collaborative professional development, align

educational programs, and refer potential hires. Student teachers, who get exposed to the different schools, are seen as an asset to tighten the collaborative work in the complex (Principal, 2018).

The PDS initiative addressed the different cultures concerning research by strengthening collaborative inquiry. In the first years, university partners invited school staff to co-present at three national conferences. More than 30 PDS participants presented and attended conferences, which was financially supported by the university. Interview participants mentioned the conferences and expressed a certain pride that their complex was represented at a national conference (Principal, 2018). A mentor teacher stated: “[School and university] collaborating on what they learned, and then going to a conference for schools who have teacher programs, not only gives those participants a view of what we are doing, but also strengthens, validates what we are doing”.

Roles

The PDS started without clear role descriptions, a written program, or a handbook. The development was left to the individual schools and CE liaisons. The liaisons attributed activities such as co-creating, coordinating, and communicating to their role and functioned as boundary-spanners between the PDS schools and the TE (Whitenack & Swanson, 2013). Liaison teams explored their work relationships to serve the teacher candidates and mentor teachers in innovative ways (Douglas, 2017). But the role as a liaison was always added to the work of the coordinator, vice-principal, or resource teacher. Time became a challenge for liaisons as well as mentor teachers.

The partnership implemented a steering committee for collaborative leadership. Initiated to be a forum for governance, reflection, and collaboration, its members were unable to find a functional role. The committee failed to communicate information regarding professional development and lacked leadership in generating and organizing Complex-wide activities. Members questioned the committee’s contributions toward the development of the PDS.

Organizational Structures

The PDS started as a partnership between one school with one TE program, expanding to seven schools and three TE programs required formal structures. Members convened liaison meetings, implemented a steering committee, and initiated complex-wide activities. The activities included professional development, conference attendance, and school visits.

Though the PDS was viewed as a complex initiative, participants recognized the individual development at the different schools. Participants were given the freedom to develop their partnership according to their needs. “I think each school has its own unique relationship and it depends a lot on the liaison, how well the liaison works with the TE liaison because that is where the relationship is rooted” (Steering, 2018). A liaison appreciated this “new system that is formed by its participants”.

After the first two years, the committees were under evaluation in their structure and function. Whereas the liaison meetings were appreciated as places to learn from each

other, the structure of the meetings lacked decision making and collaborative initiative to plan complex-wide activities. Principals' awareness of the discrepancy in numbers of mentor teachers at the various schools called for more even distribution to sustain the partnership (Principal, 2018).

Conclusion

This Complex-wide PDS was shown to be a valuable structure to promote and improve teacher education. It was based on collaboration among programs and emphasized relationship building and discourse about best practices in teacher education. Envisioned, initiated, and enacted by TE and school members, this PDS partnership adjusted common practices in teacher education to create a learning culture through collaborative practices. Collaborative leadership allowed the shift to an institutional responsibility in the organization of teacher candidate placements, this holds the possibility of increased quality in placements and a change in policy (Frazier et al., 2015). This research is a contribution to the development of teacher education in the State of Hawai'i and revealed helpful structures for meaningful teacher education.

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