

A School's Professional Culture and Its Effect on the Formation of a Professional Development School

By
Teresa
Hayes

Introduction

The Teacher Education Redesign Initiative (TERI) is a program in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities that is working to improve teacher education and consequently improve high school graduation rates and reduce the student achievement gap (Sato, 2010). Part of this redesign involves creating nine Professional Development School (PDS) sites at local schools. This study examined the formation of one of these partnerships to learn about how the school's professional culture affects the partnership.

Goals of PDS sites:

1. To effectively train new teachers.
2. To offer professional development for veteran educators.
3. To offer practice-based research opportunities for practitioners and university researchers.

One of the prominent functions of a PDS partnership is the training of future teachers through the co-teaching model. In the co-teaching model, the pre-service teacher and the cooperating (veteran) teacher collaborate in the classroom as a team of educators. Also, in the co-teaching model, the pre-service teacher is involved at the school for most of the academic year and is able to see the progression of students during the longer field placement. Overall, PDS sites and co-teaching help to form a more collaborative environment for all the educators involved. The school in the study consists of students in grades 6-10 and is a medium size school with approximately 600 students. Currently, there are two teachers acting as TERI liaisons at the school who work with the university, in addition to their normal teaching responsibilities, to facilitate the communication between the two institutions. At the time of the study, several of the district and school leaders had recently changed.

Method

1. Development of questions

See the questions to the right. Through the questions, we wanted to address both the present conditions at the school, and what the teachers would like to see, or think they will be seeing as the partnership is developed. We also tried to create questions that would ask about the formal and informal leadership in the building and how that is influencing the PDS site development.

2. School visits

I visited the school three times to observe the school. These visits gave me an overview of the school, but I didn't use any of the specific observations for my formal data.

3. Participants

The study's participants included four teachers and the principal with one teacher from each grade level, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9/10th.

4. Interviews

The interviews were either in-person or over the phone, depending on the subject's preference. A digital voice recorder was used to record the interviews. Then, I transcribed each of the interviews. After the transcription, I coded the interviews for general responses.

Interview questions

Teacher's perspective

- Tell me about your current opportunities for professional learning.
- Tell me about your current opportunities for teacher leadership.
- Tell me about the current work culture or working climate.

Teacher's work

- As the school enters in to a partnership with the University of Minnesota over the next few years, what would you like [the teachers'] professional learning opportunities to look like?
- What would you like opportunities for teacher leadership to look like?
- Overall, what do you think the impact the partnership with the University of Minnesota will be on your work as a teacher and the culture of your school?

Students

- This question is about relationships among you, your students, and a teacher candidate. In the partnership with the University of Minnesota, you will have the opportunity to build a relationship with a teacher candidate in your classroom across a whole school year. Tell me how you think that will affect the relationship between you, your students, and the teacher candidate?
- How do you think that the increased presence of pre-service teachers throughout the year will impact the learning of students?

Leadership

- I understand there have been quite a few changes in leadership at your school and in the district. How have the changes in administration impacted the leadership in the building and in the district?
- How do you think your school and district leadership will impact the development of the partnership with the University of Minnesota?

Findings

Teacher's Perspective

Teaching teams

- Leadership and professional development through grade level and subject area teams.

Choice in professional opportunities

- Involvement in leadership.
- Choices in type of professional development.

"I would say more than other schools that I have worked at, the team based philosophy here has sort of empowered us to take more leadership roles at a local level, so at a grade level for example. I think the teachers feel very empowered to try new things, to make the schedule work and to make class groupings work. I feel like in our classrooms we are empowered to do new things."

Teacher's work

Professional development to work with university students

- Learn how to teach a different age group (college students).
- How to work with participants in a year-long program.
- Professional development is brought to the school.

Teacher leadership roles

- Existing liaison position is important.
- Possibly add a "working advisory committee."
- Communication is important in partnership.
- Opportunity for progress in the profession.

"I don't know how to teach a 22-year old. I didn't become a college professor."

Students

More adults in the classroom.

- Multiple teaching strategies, communication styles, and perspectives will help students.
- Students develop relationships with both adults.

Better relationships with students.

- With the year-long program, pre-service teachers would form much better relationships with students.
- co-teaching experience would have a "more holistic and more organic development" compared to the artificiality of traditional student teaching.

"There is more adult presence. I think that it would only help to benefit them."

Leadership

Stabilization of leadership changes.

- Rocky at the beginning.
- Things are stabilizing.
- School now has an executive team.
- Teachers would like to see more of a partnership between the teachers and administration.

Teacher leadership.

- Teacher leadership has played a large role in partnership and helped carry the program

through the changes in leadership.

- Partnership wasn't solely an administrative movement.

Unknown legislature funding.

- Uncertainty about the future of the district.
- Teachers are trying to make themselves competitive if they have to find new jobs.
- Preparing for changes but moving forward.

Discussion

How this study impacts this PDS site

- This study gives feedback to university faculty and school staff about how to proceed with this partnership.
- Professional development will be extremely important for teachers to learn about working with university students and each other.

How this study applies to other PDS sites

- It was crucial to this partnership that teachers were involved in the project early.
- Teachers were already involved in the leadership of the building in other ways (somewhat because of the school's small size.) Schools that have teachers involved in leadership are going to transition to a PDS site more easily.
- It would be interesting to study a large school that is in the process of becoming a PDS site to see if school size influences the creation of a PDS site.

How PDS sites impacts the profession

- PDS sites will improve collaboration in the education field
- They will increase the flow of new ideas and best practices.
- They will also give teachers opportunities for leadership (as an alternative to administrative positions.)
- They will give teachers opportunities to be involved in research at the universities.
- They will hopefully increase the retention of new teachers by effectively preparing teachers for the classroom.

References

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¹Interview 1, ²Interview 4

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