



Teachers as Agents of Change: Innovative Professional Development School Partnerships in the Pacific

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Abstract

Faculty at the University of Hawaii at Manoa Master of Education in Teaching Program (MEdT) found that teacher candidates can serve as positive agents of change in professional development school placements. The reciprocal, relational aspect of professional development, shared funding, and the infusion of collaborative research emerge as three noteworthy MEdT strengths and opportunities. MEdT program coordinators summarize the challenges of working in professional development schools into three broad categories: Teacher Teaming, Teacher Inclusion, and Teacher Evaluation. Institutions are encouraged to strategically consider the strengths and challenges inherent in partnerships with Professional Development Schools (PDS) when designing new teacher education programs. PDS partnerships provide a milieu for creating respectful, reciprocal and responsible models of teacher education.

The Master of Education in Teaching (MEdT) Program is a two-year, field-based program designed for candidates desiring a career in teaching who have completed baccalaureate degrees in fields other than education. Founded in 1991, the MEdT program has three principles that underlie the program and guide strategic planning: a) Students take responsibility for their own learning, b) Student teachers become skilled in the methods of practitioner research, and c) Student teaching practice integrates preservice teacher preparation and inservice professional development opportunities (McEwan, 1996). Placing candidates in professional development school classrooms throughout the four-semester program enables candidates to become skilled in the methods of practitioner research through the integration of preservice and inservice professional development renewal. MEdT candidates are placed in supportive cohort structures, and are actively engaged in the work of field teaching two days weekly during the first and second semesters. During the third semester, student teachers are in their field classrooms each day of the week and complete a culminating solo-teaching unit plan. At the completion of the third semester, MEdT teacher candidates are eligible for State of Hawaii licensure as highly qualified teachers. The final semester of the MEdT program is the internship semester where candidates focus on completing inquiry research projects and graduate degree requirements while working in teaching positions (University of Hawaii College of Education, 2013).

The historical development of professional development schools

The term Professional Development School (PDS) began to emerge in the United States in the mid-1980s. Grades PK-12 and university professional development school partnerships began with four objectives: a) preparing future educators, b) providing current educators with ongoing professional development, c) encouraging joint school–university faculty investigation of education-related issues, and d) promoting the learning of P–12 students (NAPDS, 2008). In 2001, The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) developed standards and detailed rubrics to evaluate the efficacy and developmental level of Professional Development Schools. The National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) further identified nine “Essentials” that need to be present for a school–university relationship to be called a PDS. These include:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach than that of any partner and furthers the profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and the broader community;

2. A 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 investigations of practice by participants;
6. An agreement developed by the 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 university and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings; and
9. Dedicated/shared resources and formal rewards/recognition structures. (NAPDS, 2008)

Significance of professional development school partnerships

Linda Darling-Hammond (2006) outlines common components of effective teacher education programs that emerged from case studies of exemplary programs. Findings reference positive university program features made possible through clinical experiences and teaching practice in PDS partnerships:

- A common, clear vision of good teaching permeates all course-work and *clinical experiences*.
- Well-defined standards of practice and performance are used to guide and evaluate coursework and *clinical work*.
- Curriculum is grounded in knowledge of child development, learning, social contexts and subject matters, taught in the *context of practice*.
- Extended *clinical experiences* are carefully developed to support the ideas and practices presented in simultaneous, closely interwoven coursework.
- Explicit strategies help students confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning and students learn about the experiences of people different from themselves.
- Strong relationships, common knowledge, and shared beliefs *link school- and university-based faculty*.
- Case study methods, teacher research, performance assessments, and portfolio evaluation apply learning to *real problems of practice*. (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 41)

Further, Aaron Levine (2006) cited PDSs as “a superb laboratory for education schools to experiment with the initiatives designed to improve student achievement” (p. 105). He indicated that a PDS can “offer the strongest bridge between teacher education and classroom outcomes, academics and clinical education, theory and practice, and schools and colleges” (p. 105). Sharon Robinson, president and CEO of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), posited that PDSs “are emerging as particularly effective, evidence-based school–university partnership models in many sites across the nation, providing academic content and pedagogical instruction that is well-integrated with extensive, closely supervised, hands-on, in-school clinical experience” (NAPDS, 2008, p. 2).

Professional Development Partnerships

The MEdT program emphasizes learning through collegial interaction at professional development field schools. The collaborative partnerships with PDSs are central to the goal of merging educational theory with contextualized educational practice. Partnership stakeholders continuously reflect on the challenges and strengths of the program to monitor and adjust as needed for effectiveness.

Challenges

MEdT program coordinators and partner school representatives summarize the challenges of working with the MEdT program into three broad categories: Teacher Teaming, Teacher Inclusion, and Teacher Evaluation.

Teacher teaming

Both preservice and inservice teachers would benefit from increased knowledge and skill in collaborative teaming. Research reveals that peer learning among small groups of teachers was the most powerful predictor of improved student achievement over time (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). Yet, a significant challenge in forming school-university partnerships is finding and nurturing educators capable of collaborative teaming with teacher candidates, colleagues and university instructors.

Teacher inclusion

There are a limited number of mentor teachers selected to partner with MEdT teacher candidates each semester. This has resulted in perceptions of school community divisiveness, particularly if the principal recommended only a select few mentor teachers. As one means of unifying the school learning community, university instructors can facilitate school wide professional development for all teachers. Nonetheless, the program desires strong mentor teachers as guides to entry-level teachers and this merit-based selection might trigger feelings of competition and resentment within the school.

Teacher evaluation

In this era of education accountability, there is tremendous pressure on teachers to positively impact student growth as part of their formal teaching evaluations. With these increased pressures, mentor teachers are reluctant to turn over their classroom to teacher candidates. The State of Hawaii Department of Education (2013) is piloting the *Hawaii Educator Effectiveness* evaluation system whereby teachers are evaluated on classroom observations; student surveys; student growth, and achievement of *Student Learning Objective*.

Strengths and opportunities

Participants at the university and the PDS believe the positives outweigh the challenges of nurturing the MEdT teacher education partnerships (Port, Murakami, Saranchock & Ichimura, 1996). The reciprocal, relational aspect of professional development, shared funding, and the infusion of collaborative research emerge as three noteworthy MEdT strengths and opportunities.

Reciprocal and relational professional development

A benefit of placing teacher candidates in a PDS is the close, professional relationships developed from sustained collaboration. MEdT assignments are designed to prompt professional dialogue between teacher candidates and mentor teachers throughout the program, which stimulates teachers to reflect on their practice. A principal of a Hawaii Department of Education public high school reports,

The MEdT program keeps us on our “professional” toes... We pay attention to being positive, solution-oriented professionals, and, as a result, we have developed a more collegial atmosphere in the school.
(Port, et.al, 1996, p. 9)

PDSs report that teacher candidates are positive role models for students and a welcome support as additional personnel for classroom management and instructional differentiation in the classroom (Port, et.al, 1996). Teacher candidates bring new energy to the school and have created place-based, culturally-based curriculum units, started garden projects, facilitated technology innovations, organized safety fairs, founded co-curricular service learning clubs, and pioneered alternative assessments.

Shared funding

The MEdT program has been a source of funding that enabled mentor teachers release time from their classrooms for professional development and/or team planning. This funding also allowed mentor teachers to visit other schools and attend education conferences to support school improvement initiatives. Further, new opportunities for collaborative grant writing are emerging, as many educational grants require community and local school partners.

Collaborative research

Candidates complete a qualitative inquiry resulting in a "School Portrait" during the first year of the MEdT program, which provides a descriptive mirror for the PDS and reflective insight into schooling for the teacher candidates. Teacher candidates work collaboratively with colleagues placed at their school to learn about what makes the learning community unique and special, as well as the challenges faced in fostering a supportive, effective, learning environment. Candidates interview at least two members of the professional development school to gain participants' perspectives. From this exploration, candidates articulate, their sense of purpose, or role within their school and community.

The culminating assignment for MEdT candidates is the Plan B Inquiry Project. Candidates select a place-based Pacific topic that has peaked their interest and conduct in-depth exploratory qualitative research within their unique teaching contexts. Plan B Inquiries often take the form of qualitative teacher action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), where the teacher intentionally implements an instructional intervention aimed to positively impact student achievement or improve an observed problem in teaching practice. These Plan B Inquiries transcend knowledge generation to include professional growth through reflection. Examples of Plan B Inquiry topics include the exploration of effects of Hawaiian curriculum units, working with English Language Learners, disciplinary literacy strategies, SPED inclusion strategies, parent communication, and Elder Advisory Councils. Mentors teachers often participate in the Plan B projects and findings from these studies have led to school-wide renewal and changes in instructional practice (Port, et.al, 1996). For example, Kessler, Zuercher and Wong (2013) published a study on how the University of Hawaii MEdT program partnered with a professional development school to implement Thinking Maps as a research-based instructional strategy. Within three years of this professional development school-university partnership initiation of Thinking Maps, student grade-level reading proficiency increased to 86%.

Conclusion

The University of Hawaii MEdT Program partners with professional development K-12 school partners as a significant program characteristic. There is growing U.S. and International trend towards PDS partnerships, like the MEdT program. Institutions are encouraged to strategically consider the strengths and challenges inherent in partnerships with PDSs when designing new teacher education programs. PDS partnerships provide a milieu for creating respectful, reciprocal and responsible models of teacher education.

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