Inquiry and Accountability in Professional Development Schools

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ABSTRACT To provide a deeper understanding of issues related to collaborative reconstruction and simultaneous renewal, the author provides a historical perspective of professional development schools (PDSs) and an overview of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education PDS standards and assessment process, with a focus on inquiry and accountability within PDSs. A series of vignettes provides examples of inquiry and accountability across diverse PDS settings. Issues surrounding assessment and quality assurance and the challenges to collaborative inquiry are illustrated through the vignettes. This discussion of PDSs, inquiry, and accountability is placed within the context of accountability as mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (2001). The author makes a contrast between PDSs that hold themselves accountable for the growth of all educators and students through their engagement in assessment and collaborative inquiry to transform teaching and learning practices and the NCLB mandates that resulted in a more narrowly defined and less complex realization of accountability.

Key words: inquiry and accountability, mandates of No Child Left Behind legislation, professional development schools

The focus of this special issue of The Journal of Educational Research is collaborative reconstruction and simultaneous renewal. The other articles in this issue describe professional development schools (PDSs) as collaborative organizations in which participants support student learning; provide a professional induction program for teacher candidates; develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of practicing teachers; and systematically inquire in and on practice so that it can be improved.

To provide a deeper understanding of issues related to collaborative reconstruction and simultaneous renewal, I explore two big ideas: (a) adults and youth in PDSs commit to sharing responsibility for using inquiry to improve teaching, learning, and leading because that is the heart of PDS work and (b) the inquiries in which participants engage provide the rationale for their cross-institutional partnership. These ideas connect PDSs, inquiry, and accountability. I explore the ideas by examining the PDS standards and assessment process, assessment and quality assurance in PDSs, and a series of vignettes that provides examples of inquiry and accountability across diverse PDS settings.

This discussion of PDS, inquiry, and accountability must first be placed within the context of accountability as mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001) legislation. Because PDSs are real schools, they must operate under the NCLB mandates. However, because PDSs have been redesigned and restructured to support a mission of professional preparation of candidates, faculty development, inquiry directed at improved practice, and enhanced student learning (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education; NCATE, 2001a), they should also exemplify a broader and more complex realization of accountability and inquiry than that typically resulting from NCLB legislation.

Review of Current Accountability Context

To contribute to the many conversations on the law’s reauthorization, the editors of Educational Leadership focused the November 2006 issue on NCLB legislation. Barton (2006), one of the contributors to this Educational Leadership issue, explained how the legislation seductively merged the constructs of testing and accountability so that education stakeholders—policy makers, community leaders, parents and families, administrators, teachers, children, and youth—would begin to equate school success and failure with student performance on the NCLB metrics. Rotberg (2006) emphasized in her essay the paradox of this merger because so many of the countries that the United States most admires for their rankings on international comparisons do not use tests to hold educators accountable (e.g., Canada, Finland, France, Japan, and Sweden). In

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addition, because test scores have become the measure of school effectiveness, the labeling and related pressures to succeed have begun to deter well-qualified teachers from teaching at high-needs schools (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Diaz, as cited in Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006).

Scherer (2006), the editor of the Educational Leadership theme issue, described how standardized tests have become the dominant force in American public schooling, reporting that the task of assessing each student's reading and mathematics skills requires the administration of 45 million tests each year. Public schools will begin to administer 11 million additional science tests in 2007.

States spent $517 million during the 2005–2006 school year on NCLB testing (Jackson & Bassett, 2005 study, as cited in Toch, 2006). That amount would have risen exponentially if state policy makers had decided to create assessments that included constructed response items (non-multiple-choice questions), such as the challenging questions on the National Assessment of Educational Progress examinations. Toch stated that "simple tasks are easier and cheaper to test" (p. 55) because of "costs anywhere from 50 cents to 5 dollars to score a constructed-response question, compared with pennies for a multiple-choice question" (p. 56).

Whereas much of NCLB legislation focuses on assessing students, a critical component of the law centers on improving teacher quality. Through its highly qualified teacher provision, NCLB legislation attempted to redress the historic failure of public schools to provide low-SES and low-achieving students with experienced and qualified teachers. Yet, 5 years later, Feller (2006) reported that 30% of the nation’s teachers still do not meet the law’s definition of highly qualified, and the quality gap between low-and high-income schools continues to grow in a number of states. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) emphasized that the teacher requirements of being highly qualified often do not accomplish the intent of NCLB legislation. Federal rules allow states to immediately label teachers as highly qualified if they enrolled in but did not begin their preparation programs or if they passed a test and earned a college major in a field related closely to the subjects that they wanted to teach. NCLB legislation does not assure that the neediest children have competent teachers because it provides no mechanism for systematically evaluating whether novice teachers can teach effectively.

Before and After NCLB: PDS, Inquiry, and Accountability

The concept of a PDS is about 100 years older than NCLB legislation. In the early 1900s, John Dewey (as cited in Archambaut, 1974) proposed and initiated several laboratory schools that were administered jointly by schools and colleges as sites for research, as well as for preparing new teachers. The laboratory schools, by and large, however, were too costly and did not offer the time or rewards for sufficient university faculty involvement. In addition, they were too far removed from the mainstream of school life to be credible (Levine, 1995). The experimental schools reached their peak in the 1960s without having fulfilled their mission.

In the 1980s, with school reformers clamoring for change, the PDS emerged as the innovation that could effectively link teacher and student learning. As theorists described (e.g., Goodlad, 1988; Holmes Group, 1995), PDSs would be innovative institutions formed through partnerships between colleges and public schools. The mission of the PDS, analogous to that of teaching hospitals in medicine, would include the professional preparation of candidates, faculty development, clinical research, and enhanced student learning. Those multiple goals would be accomplished through a deliberate program of professional education and clinical research performed in the context of practice. PDSs, in contrast to the laboratory school innovations that preceded them, would be real schools that were staffed and structured especially to support student and teacher learning.

The potential impact of the PDS is related to one of its unique features: it is an institution positioned strategically at the intersection of teacher education and school reform. The two sectors of education have traditionally found it difficult to bridge their differences, although each has a large stake in the success of the other and much to contribute to that success. PDSs create bridges between higher education institutions and the public schools (Levine & Trachtman, 2005). The PDS mission requires partners to share responsibility for professional and children’s learning and to commit and reallocate their resources to this new setting and to a new type of work. Most significantly, participants in PDSs accept responsibility, professionally and publicly, for the outcomes of all adults, children, and youth.

PDSs, like other interinstitutional partnerships, succeed only when partners believe that the returns on their investments of time, energy, and financial resources are sufficient. Because organizations prefer autonomy to collaboration (Van de Ven & Walker, 1984), individuals and institutions agree to maintain their interdependent relationships when the cost of producing services collaboratively is less than the cost of doing so independently (Hall, Clark, Giordano, Johnson, & Roekel, 1977).

PDS Standards and Assessment Process

To reach the vision for PDSs through the continued development of PDS partnerships and to assure quality and accountability, the NCATE initiated a project to develop PDS standards and an assessment process for PDSs. As a result of its multiyear work with hundreds of practitioners, NCATE published the Standards for Professional Development Schools (2001a) and the Handbook for the Assessment of Professional Development Schools (2001b). Five PDS standards resulted from this work: (I) Learning Community, (II) Accountability and Quality Assurance, (III) Collabo-
ration, (IV) Diversity and Equity, and (V) Structures, Resources, and Roles.

The standards and assessment process reflected the elements that were important and valued in the culture of PDS partnerships, including inquiry, collaboration, parity, and public practice. In stark contrast to most other standards and assessments (e.g., national curricular standards and current state tests driven by NCLB), these PDS components were developed by the NCATE simultaneously and aligned with each other so that practitioners would have a coherent system for supporting institutional growth and assuring internal and external accountability (see Levine & Trachtman, 2005, for a complete description of the standards and assessment principles and processes).

Although the principles of inquiry and accountability are woven throughout the five PDS standards, Standard II, Accountability and Quality Assurance, provides the clearest articulation of this core focus:

PDS Assessment Process

The self-assessment component of the PDS assessment process, called self-study, engages PDS partners in the critical examination of their work to assure quality and accountability and to provide participants with results showing how the partnership meets the NCATE PDS standards. Most important, as a form of assessment, self-study relies on participants’ professional judgment. Rather than focusing only on students’ standardized test results, the PDS self-study process requires partners to document their accomplishments, measure the impact of their work, and determine the outcomes achieved by all learners.

PDS self-study enables participants to investigate systematically the efforts of their collaboration by identifying strengths and weaknesses of the partnership. Through an iterative process of gathering data, drawing tentative conclusions, raising questions, gathering additional data, and partner discussion, participants can formulate conclusions about how, and how well, the PDS partnership meets the standards.

The following vignettes showcase PDS examples of individual and institutional engagement in inquiry in relation to the three practices sited in the previous paragraph (see other examples throughout this issue of JER). Inquiry in teaching and learning may be as complex as a sophisticated action research project that draws on multiple methods and far-reaching dissemination strategies or as simple as a group of teachers and teacher candidates sitting around a conference table debating the merits of student work and the ways in which they might change their practices to enhance students’ performance. Vignettes 1–3 emerged during the standards and assessment creation process (1995–2001). The fourth vignette summarizes six inquiries reflecting the ways in which partners have used the standards and assessment process to improve student and adult learning. Unlike the accountability process prescribed by NCLB, participants in these vignettes began with the questions that emerged through close examination and identification of learners’ needs. The final vignette demonstrates some of the inquiry challenges that remain in PDSs.
At the end of the first year of the PDS, only 65% of third-through fifth-grade students passed the state test in reading. The principal began to monitor the individual progress of each student in the school by examining data from the running records, the state tests (Grades 3–5), and the district-mandated achievement test (Grades 1–2). Despite some gains on the state test (75% passing), a number of students were not making sufficient progress despite the new approach to reading. The principal identified 24 third- and fourth-grade students who seemed most likely to fail the next state reading test; he reached out to his university partner in the PDS, and, together, they created a strategy for meeting the needs of these children by collaborating with teachers and teacher candidates who were studying to become reading experts.

During the first 2 weeks of the school year, the instructor prepared her practicum students (teacher candidates) at the university by demonstration and guided practice in the instructional strategies. Two teachers and an aide from the school joined the university class during that time to receive the same preparation. After the second week, the class and the instructor worked in the school 4 days a week with the targeted elementary students in small groups. Following the reading instruction, the class met at the PDS to evaluate the lessons and prepare for the following day. On Fridays, the class met at the university for continued instruction in reading strategies. The school staff who participated in the initial training assisted with the reading instruction and continued the program between semesters when the university was not in session. Finally, additional teacher candidates who enrolled in the reading class in the spring semester continued the instruction with the same elementary pupils.

In the spring testing, 58% of the 24 students targeted passed the reading test, and all others made significant gains from the previous year. The students were taught again by the reading class the following year (1997–1998), and all targeted students ultimately passed the reading portion of the test. That spring, the school’s passing rate on the state test was 95.8%.

As a first step, participants collected student work for several months. From each child’s collection, the students and one or more teachers and collaborating teacher candidates selected work to share with parents at a conference. Teachers typically selected work that evidenced critical or creative thinking, mastery of challenging content, and skill development over time. Although the students’ criteria were more eclectic, all of the children articulated why they had selected each included work product. Older students had to reflect in writing about why they had made their selections.

Students presented their portfolios to parents several times a year. In response to a prepared Guide for Portfolio Discussions, the parents used the portfolio review process to (a) talk about the things that their children did well, (b) comment on the portfolio artifacts on which the students were working, and (c) make at least one positive comment about the material that they saw in the portfolio. At the conclusion of the portfolio review, the teacher and student selected a piece of work for the child’s cumulative file and sent the remaining material home.

Reflecting on the process after 1 year, PDS participants affirmed the value of involving students in conferences that had previously been held for only parents and teachers. The teachers underscored the power of a portfolio conversation that focused on and included the child. Yet, as they continued to reflect on their successful new process, participants identified two ways that they could improve it. First, the teachers wanted to help students develop stronger commitments to personally define learning goals as a vehicle for assessing their own growth. Second, the teachers wanted to construct ways to formalize the role of parents as authentic and appropriate participants in the portfolio review process.

From those formulations, participants decided to create opportunities for joint student, parent, and teacher goal setting at the beginning of the school year. Teachers at the PDS now work to facilitate those conferences so that children are central to their own learning. After the confer-
ences, the children and teachers agree to use the learning goals to select work for later portfolios reviews.

Vignette 3: Inquire collaboratively to determine what works best (or does not) for students (cited in Trachtman, 1998). One of the teachers participating in the NCATE field-test project provided the following description of the work in which she and her PDS colleagues engaged:

Having just spent three hours today at our PDS team’s regular three-hour research meeting (that happens every three weeks during the school day while our interns teach our classes), I’ve been thinking about the importance of inquiry and also of the importance of time, commitment, and collaboration of college and school faculty in this whole operation. This is the first year that this group has met formally to discuss their individual research. The meeting took place, as it always does, in the elementary school library. The meeting today was chaired, as it always is, by the same college faculty member. This professor’s role is to move the meeting forward and interject new ideas and theories. But it is the teachers who present their work at the meeting. It is their individual inquiries that are shared and hashed out by the others. This is a meeting of eight school faculty members and the interns’ supervisor (who is also a full-time college professor). Three school faculty members present their research at each meeting. School and college faculty respond to the presentations. It is important to state how valuable these meetings are and how they directly affect our teaching. I can certainly see room for improvement in these meetings. We need to be hearing about the college faculty members’ research agendas, and I see this coming next year.

These meetings could never have happened in our first year as a collaborative. But the seeds were there then. There was time. There was discussion. There was a shared vision and the determination that school and college faculty would enter the conversation at exactly the same level.

It is important to state right out that this PDS is 9 years old, and it has taken a very long time to get to the point where we are today. Significant amounts of PDS time have been allocated for the purpose of professional growth from the very beginning of the collaborative, and I believe that this time has been central to the success of the inquiry that occurs in our collaborative.

Vignette 4: Conduct inquiry on the effects of the PDS on teaching and learning (complete descriptions in Levine & Trachtman, 2005). Two years after the publication of the PDS standards and assessment process, Levine and Trachtman invited an array of PDS participants to write about how and why their partnerships had begun to use these tools. The authors’ discussions focused on three questions: (a) How did the PDS partnership use the PDS standards and assessment process? (b) What outcomes did participants identify that were related to the use of the standards and assessments? and (c) How have the standards affected the partnership’s work, including mission, leadership, research, roles, relationships and responsibilities, and accountability? The following fourth vignette was created on the basis of PDS participants’ discussion of those questions. The vignette provides examples of inquiries from six PDS sites that began with questions related to learner needs. The sites demonstrate the ways that PDS partnerships have used the standards and assessment process to improve student and adult learning.

Site 1. Intensive use of the PDS standards by partners in this site guided their development of structures to support a robust learning community with relatively clear roles and expectations for all stakeholders. Outcomes associated with the use of the standards included steady increases in achievement scores in the more mature PDS sites and teacher empowerment.

Site 2. Through self-study, partners developed research and inquiry skills and new collaborative roles. They used the self-study process to assess and revise their PDS practices.

Site 3. This PDS network used the standards to support and encourage research within and on partnership outcomes. The network adopted the standards as a teaching tool to provide a common frame of reference for sites at various developmental stages.

Site 4. The partners used PDS standards as a learning system for developing partnerships within a regional collaborative that brought together multiple universities and partner schools. Use of the PDS standards and assessments reinforced a shared language and provided common definitions and structures for all members of the collaborative.

Site 5. This top down–bottom up approach to state policy development and implementation focused on the redesign of teacher education and K–12 schools. The national NCATE PDS standards were adapted to reflect the language and priorities of the state plan, and the standards became an important part of a statewide system of accountability.

Site 6. Participants examined outcomes for teacher candidates in PDS and non-PDS settings by collecting data related to candidate performance, knowledge, and dispositions. Qualitative data analyses showed important differences between candidates who interned for a full year in a PDS setting and those who engaged in more typical student teaching experiences.

Challenges to Collaborative Inquiry

For PDSs, inquiry presumes collaboration within and between the respective school and university partners. Prior to NCLB legislation, Snyder (1998) raised important concerns regarding the lack of support for teacher engagement in inquiry; currently, carving out organizational time for teachers to work with other teachers has become even more challenging. Inquiries related to students’ performance on standardized, high-stakes tests sometimes replace other forms of inquiry, and in doing so, privileges the basic skills and competencies associated with those tests. Furthermore, inquiry-related constraints revolve around the more typical issues of insufficient rewards and time as well as bureaucracy and budget. Few PDSs have significant dollars to support inquiry efforts.
Collaborative Inquiry

Despite so much seemingly incontrovertible evidence of the advantages of collaborative work, more than 20 years of research demonstrate that teachers still prefer working in relative isolation. McTaggart (1989) found that teachers valued individual tasks and preferred work that kept them isolated from colleagues, thereby promoting isolation and privatism. The teachers studied by Johnston, Markle, and Arhar (1988) reported that isolation from colleagues assured professional autonomy. Lieberman (1993) elaborated on this finding by noting that “the press for teachers to work together as colleagues is strong, but so perhaps, is the desire or necessity for teachers to feel that they have the freedom and autonomy as individuals to construct classrooms that make sense to them and their students” (p. vii).

Initial enthusiasm about the benefits of collegiality has been tempered by increasing skepticism (Hargreaves, 1993, 1995; Little, 1990). Critics suggest that by concentrating solely on the adverse consequences of teacher isolation, reformers have failed to recognize some of its functional and positive aspects. From a psychological viewpoint, classroom isolation offers teachers a measure of privacy and protection from outside interference (Hargreaves, 1995). Flinders (1988) suggested that isolation is an adaptive strategy that teachers use to protect the time and energy required of them to meet the instructional needs of the classroom. Consequently, isolation is a self-imposed state and a desirable practice—another strategy for teachers to use at the appropriate time.

Hargreaves (1991) has been particularly critical of the perspective that attributes all-encompassing virtues to collaboration. He posited a construct called “contrived collegiality,” in which administrators regulate and compel teacher collaboration, where teachers are expected to engage with peers during specific times and places. In contrast, Hargreaves suggested that collaborative working relationships between teachers and colleagues are spontaneous, voluntary, development oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable.

Parity Between PDS Partners

Parity problems between the school and the university can create a number of other obstacles for inquiry in teaching and learning. As illustrated in Vignette 5 in the following paragraph, even in well-developed PDSs, long-standing perceptions of who holds the knowledge and skill continue to prevail.

Vignette 5: Knowledge and skill perceptions (adapted from Trachtman, 1998). Eight teachers volunteered to conduct action research in their PDS. The teachers chose their own topic, and a university colleague guided them through the process. They met individually with their instructor (university colleague) and as a group. All went well until the time came for the teachers to write up their findings. All of the teachers passively resisted. They believed that they had not been given enough direction, explaining that they were expected to demonstrate principles that they did not understand. The teachers said that although they were told that action research would be a cooperative undertaking, the university faculty member created a hierarchical teacher–student relationship with them. Simultaneously, the faculty member felt very disappointed, believing that the teachers were just trying to avoid doing the work. After numerous meetings, the university faculty member and the teachers reached a compromise. All the teachers eventually completed their projects, but several admitted the insecurity they felt, believing that their work “was not very good” or that they were “really bad writers.” They feared having their work judged especially because the university faculty member’s opinion was important to them and they were afraid that she would think less of them as professionals.

Conclusions

Haycock (2006) asserted that NCLB legislation has increased the visibility of each child in American public schools. That visibility, however, has failed to create positive, nurturing education environments. PDSs, in contrast, require that participants and partnering organizations hold themselves accountable for the growth of all adults, children, and young persons through their (a) engagement in assessment to transform day-to-day teaching and learning practices, (b) participation in collaborative inquiry to determine what works best (or does not work) for students, and (c) commitment to conducting systematic assessment on the effects of the PDS on teaching and learning. Those elements of PDS inquiry and accountability create the conditions necessary for collaborative reconstruction and simultaneous renewal.

REFERENCES


