

# Implementing Structures to Promote Professional Growth in PDS Undergraduate Student Representatives

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**ABSTRACT:** Teacher candidates benefit from PDS through clinically rich practices embedded in education courses. Each year, the PDS Consortium of a college in western New York invites undergraduate students to become PDS representatives. These representatives attend meetings and assist with professional development opportunities. They serve while learning information, gaining experiences, and developing into educators. However, there is a paucity of research documenting the impact of opportunities concerning the undergraduate self-confidence. The purpose of this research is to document the experiences of PDS representatives concerning confidence. Participants are current PDS representatives interviewed in the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester. Researcher created structures were implemented throughout the semester. Participants participated in a brief survey and interview at the end of the semester to measure if any impact in self-confidence. Preliminary findings indicate categories of self-confidence with public speaking skills, organizational skills, and collaboration skills emerged using a constant comparative contrast approach.

*This paper aligns with NAPDS Essential 2: A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community.*

While the college in Western New York's PDS program was first established back in 1991 with a single school, being later awarded a grant to increase the number of schools to four, and steadily increasing throughout the years until the current amount of 45, it was not until in recent years that the undergraduate representatives were introduced into the program. The undergraduate representatives serve to: (a) help with the daily activities in running a PDS and its multiple professional development meetings; (b) liaisons to the student body; (c) represent the voices of teacher candidates to the college faculty and school partners; and (d) assist the co-directors in monitoring the success of PDS action-based research initiatives, as well as conduct their own PDS related research (Day, 2018). Since the first several were invited to participate in this manner, many undergraduate representatives have entered the program. However, there is a paucity of research findings that show documentation of the impact of these types of opportunities concerning the undergraduate students' self-confidence. The purpose of this research is to document the experiences of current undergraduate PDS representatives concerning confidence. The foundation of this study was based on the following question: Does the implementation of PDS-related structures impact self-confidence in PDS undergraduate student representatives?

## Relevant School-Partnership Literature

In examining the impact of PDS-related structures upon undergraduate PDS representatives, it is important to take into

consideration the differences between PDS and other teacher preparation models. One of the four purposes of the PDS model is the preparation of future educators (NAPDS, 2008). This is evident in the second, third, and fourth essentials of a PDS, which focuses on "a school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators," "ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants," and "a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice" (NAPDS, 2008). While all teacher preparation models work to produce future educators, there has been a growing number of research behind the positive impact of the PDS model. In a study documenting the extent of the differences between PDS and non-PDS teacher candidates at the point of receiving their license to teach, Castle, Fox, and Fuhrman (2009) noticed a development of five themes that focused on the quality and depth of teachers' thinking and experience. Throughout each of these five themes, the results of the PDS teacher candidates showed them able to think, connect, and integrate on a deeper level than that of the non-PDS teacher candidates in the study. Castle and Reilly (2011) reviewed 26 evidence based studies from peer-reviewed journals that focused on the PDS preparation of teacher candidates documenting the impact of the PDS model on teacher candidates. Their results discovered a theme throughout the studies of PDS teacher candidates as being "more professional in terms of collaboration, inquiry, leadership, identity and dispositions" (Castle & Reilly, 2011).

While these findings help to support the importance of the PDS model for current teacher candidates, it is also important to

take note of any impact the PDS model has left on current in-service teachers. Sandoval-Lucero, Shanklin, Sobel, Townsend, Davis, and Kalisher (2011) examined the experiences of beginning teachers from the PDS, traditional, and teacher-in-residence models. This study examined 36 teachers from the three models to see if there were differences in preparation and how the teachers perceived their preparation to the demands of teaching. Their findings showed that there were differences in the three preparation models, and the teachers felt they were lacking in certain areas in one model as opposed to another model. An example of this can be seen in how the teacher-in-residence model prepared individuals that had come from other professions to a degree, but the PDS teachers were better prepared due to their various experiences in different classrooms. The result of this outcome found that those with better preparation were more likely to have higher efficacy, feel more responsible, and even tended to remain in the profession for a longer period (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). This result is supplemented by a study from Latham, Mertens, and Hamann (2015) in which they researched teacher attrition data from over 6,500 teachers in Illinois over a 14-year period from 1997-2010. The research indicated that teachers who had chosen the PDS model of teacher preparation were more likely to persist as teachers when compared to teachers that had been more traditionally prepared. Sandholtz and Wasserman (2001) had also noted that when comparing both traditional and PDS programs, suggestions that were made by teacher candidates and mentor teachers for improving the traditional program were already a part of the PDS program.

While there is a wealth of information that documents the importance of teacher candidates in a PDS school, it is important to also take note of the documentation regarding the impact of confidence for teacher candidates. Since confidence of teacher candidates can be impacted by a variety of factors, it is important to take note of the research that documents findings and results with positive and negative impacts. One such factor can be the teacher education program. Sandholtz and Wasserman (2001) found through a comparative study between a traditional and PDS program that the teacher candidates in the PDS program reported more confidence in their overall teaching abilities and fewer areas of concern than the teacher candidates in the traditional program. The PDS teacher candidates noted in their evaluation of the program how benefits such as extended field experience, frequent observations and multiple forms of assessment, and following the school calendar to be more involved with the students helped to develop more confidence in their teaching and their ability to influence student learning (Sandholtz & Wasserman, 2001).

A second factor can be the past experiences as students. Street and Strang (2009) found that when conducting research with participants who were in-service teachers completing their master's degree in secondary education that took a graduate course designed for improving professional writing skills in all content areas, there were some that had had negative school experiences and others that had positive experiences. For those

that had a positive outlook towards writing, they noted how they had felt well supported regarding their writing as students and how writing was a part of their lives. Those that had negative experiences while in school noted a lasting effect so that, even as adults, they remained fearful of writing. Bekdemir (2010) findings also relate that negative experiences for teacher candidates tended to lower confidence which could lead to an avoidance of mathematics in fear of failure.

## Data Collection

The participants for this study were two teacher candidates in their sophomore and junior years at the college. Candidates were interviewed in the spring semester of 2017 before starting to take on responsibilities that following summer. In order to be interviewed for the position of PDS representative, each candidate needed to submit paperwork including an application, a letter documenting their interest for wanting to become a PDS representative, at least one letter of recommendation, a copy of their resume, and a copy of their current transcript. Once an interview had been scheduled with the teacher candidate, the PDS director, graduate assistant, and senior PDS representatives would interview each candidate. After each interview, the candidate would be emailed by the PDS director to let them know the outcome.

The participants of this study were interviewed at the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester at a college in Western New York using a brief pre-survey of six questions using a four-point Likert scale. The four-point Likert scale was used indicating strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree with the question. The four-point forced Likert scale was used so the participants would indicate an opinion, without the option of a neutral option. Each question was used to establish a baseline of the participants' confidence level, which was scored between one through four. After completion of the pre-survey, teacher candidates progressed through the rest of the semester attending to the regular duties of being a PDS representative. However, researcher created structures were implemented during this time in order to document any impact upon the confidence levels of the participants. At the end of the semester, the same pre-survey questions were replicated for the post-survey in order to document consistency across results. The authors believed that the inclusion of open-ended response questions in the post-survey would generate more robust data.

In addition to the above surveys, the authors collaborated in the Fall of 2017 with a former director of the college in Western New York's PDS Consortium to develop structures that would be implemented over the course of the semester in order to document any impact upon the confidence levels of the PDS representatives. These structures given by the former director from her observations and years of experience running the Western New York's PDS Consortium. The authors asked her to provide a list of items that she felt were pertinent to the continued success of PDS Consortium training of teacher candidates. When completed, the authors determined a total of

eight structures that were to be implemented throughout the Fall 2017 semester. These included:

1. Developing authentic relationships with PDS faculty, directors, staff, school personnel, and teacher candidates, including the graduate assistant and PDS representatives.
2. Creating opportunities for teambuilding among all these stakeholders; striving for mutual respect and a willingness to appreciate the opinions of all members.
3. Empowering PDS representatives through opportunities, responsibilities, and a sense of ownership in the program/PDS; creating many leadership opportunities.
4. Helping representatives understand and internalize the overview or big picture/purpose of PDS.
5. Expressing belief in the PDS representatives as important to the success of PDS; helping the representatives believe in their own successful future, helping to select quality representatives from within each of the representatives.
6. Encouraging the representatives to be role models for all teacher candidates and ambassadors for the PDS.
7. Providing opportunities for representatives to develop their oral and written communication skills, particularly in front of their peers and other professionals.
8. Keeping in touch with past representatives; Where are they now? How is their career going? Suggestions they would make, etc.

These eight structures were created to work together to impact the confidence of the PDS representatives and were designed so that they could be handled in a variety of ways. For example, the first structure was based around the development of authentic relationships between faculty, directors, staff, school personnel, and fellow teacher candidates. In order to develop authentic relationships between the representatives, they were invited to a lunch at a restaurant near the college. A location off campus was chosen since it was within close proximity of the campus and provided an informal atmosphere for conversation. This lunch was set during the first week of the semester so that each of the representatives could learn more about one another and discuss goals for the upcoming year. Building authentic relationships with faculty was also important since representatives work to build connections between faculty and teacher candidates. In order to build these relationships with faculty, the representatives were introduced by the lead researcher of this study, a graduate assistant who works primarily for the PDS Consortium located on campus, so that the faculty and representatives could become more acquainted with one another outside of a classroom setting. Once the representatives had been introduced, the conversations were typically formal in the beginning. However, over the course of the semester, the conversations would become more relaxed as the representatives came into regular contact with the faculty outside of the classroom at events and elsewhere on campus.

Since the second structure focused on providing opportunities for teambuilding while striving for a mutual respect and willingness to appreciate different opinions, it was important to provide time for the representatives to meet in the PDS office, located in the same building that house the Elementary Education & Reading department. By spending time in the PDS office, the representatives would be able to plan out responsibilities, work on organizing events, and enjoy some free time to speak with their peers. However, in order to achieve this goal, it was important that the representatives dedicated time in their weekly schedule to coming to the PDS office. Unfortunately, while the representatives did work to keep their weekly schedule of at least four hours in the office, due to previous commitments and responsibilities, not all participants were able to continually fulfill the four hour a week obligation. For example, one representative did not have reliable transportation to and from the campus which prohibited her from fulfilling her weekly schedule. Therefore, while the representatives did strive to meet their weekly hourly goals, it was not always possible to do so. In order to not repeat this issue, careful consideration by the PDS office will make sure that future PDS representatives will have schedules that are aligned with PDS obligations. It was not that the four hours were too much, rather that it was the conflict of scheduling between PDS representative and PDS office obligations.

The third structure was used to provide opportunities for the representatives to feel a responsibility and ownership of the program. One of the ways in which this was accomplished was the responsibility of helping to prepare, assist in running, and taking notes at meetings that were held at local PDS schools throughout the semester. During each semester, the college in Western New York's PDS would hold one to two meetings at local PDS schools in order to strengthen the bonds between the PDS school and the rest of the PDS Consortium, provide professional development to all members, and provide the school an opportunity to showcase a topic or strategy that they had implemented into their school to a successful degree. The PDS representatives were tasked with helping to prepare for these meetings by communicating with fellow teacher candidates to attend these meetings, organizing paperwork to be given out, and organizing whatever might need to be brought to these meetings.

Once at the meeting, representatives were tasked with responsibilities such as assisting people with signing in, helping set up the meeting space, or seeing to whatever task in which they might be called upon to help. One representative during this time would be tasked with taking notes for these meetings. This involved using the agenda prepared by the PDS director and taking notes at the meetings. The notes were sent to the PDS director and filed so that anyone that came to the next meeting would be aware of any new information from the previous meeting. In other words, the PDS representatives were tasked with very important responsibilities and this was done to provide a sense of ownership in the program since these

meetings required so much from the responsibilities of the representatives.

The fourth structure was designed to help the representatives understand and internalize the purpose of PDS. In order to achieve this, it was important to provide opportunities in which they could speak about PDS to their fellow teacher candidates. This was accomplished through a new initiative that had begun to develop at the end of the previous academic year called “Talking PDS with Teacher Candidates.” Essentially, the representatives and graduate assistant would ask to attend education related courses to talk about the PDS mission statement, responsibilities and opportunities that were available to teacher candidates. These presentations were typically five to ten minutes and occurred during the first three weeks of the semester. Since these presentations were so short and occurred so early in the semester, the representatives had a lot to learn about PDS in a short amount of time.

With the fifth structure, it was important to express to the representatives the belief that they were important to the success of PDS and help them to believe in their own success. This was done through making the representatives aware of the different jobs and responsibilities that they had which could be applied to their future careers as teachers. The representatives were also provided weekly instructions through multiple means in order to make sure they were aware of what goals needed to be achieved in the short or long term. A few examples of these multiple measures were: set up a group chat through the application “GroupMe,” contact through personal text messages, sending out a per weekly to-do list for the following week, and leaving a paper list in the PDS office. However, there were occasional stumbling blocks when working with this structure. For example, it was important that the representatives communicate about events through multiple means, such as bulletin boards and social media. The bulletin boards that were overseen by PDS were updated with event flyers on a bi-weekly schedule and changed if they had been put up in the previous academic year in order to not look unkempt. Unfortunately, while the representatives did utilize social media on occasion, it was not to a great extent.

The sixth structure was used to encourage the representatives to be role models to their fellow teacher candidates. This was achieved from the previously mentioned “Talking PDS with Teacher Candidates” initiative in which the representatives went to various education classes on campus to speak about PDS and upcoming events and opportunities for teacher candidates. Through the initiative, the representatives spoke multiple times, so teacher candidates were able to see them speak as many as four times throughout the first few weeks of the semester. Since the teacher candidates saw them during those first few weeks, the teacher candidates could make a connection that the representatives held important roles, and thus the representatives were called upon to help with answering questions and directing their peers to faculty that would be better suited to answering any questions that were beyond their understanding.

The seventh structure was to provide opportunities for the representatives to develop their oral and written communication skills. This was accomplished through two different means. The first of these was the “Talking PDS with Teacher Candidates” initiative. Since the representatives spoke numerous times to numerous groups, they were able to develop their oral communication skills through the multiple times that they talked. If the representatives felt that there was something that they should leave out the next time that they spoke or that they focused on one topic too much, then they would take the time to examine how they could readjust what they were saying in order to better communicate with their fellow teacher candidates. The second way was in how the representatives wrote down notes at the meetings that were held at local PDS schools. Since the notes that were taken at these meetings were important because of their future usage, it was imperative that the representatives develop their written communication skills when taking notes and submitting to the PDS director.

The eighth structure was set to keep in touch with past representatives. This was used to bridge the current representatives to the previous representatives as a way of establishing connections in which the current representatives could turn to the previous representatives in case they had questions or concerns. Unfortunately, the past representatives were only able to help the current representatives to a small degree. This was due to the previous representatives all being in their final semester and student teaching in their placements at the time of this study. For example, while the previous representatives could assist the current representatives with helping to set up during the day of a meeting at a local PDS school, they were unable to assist with anything the current representatives worked on during their office hours on campus. Another idea developed as a way of keeping the two groups in contact with one another but was unable to come to fruition. At the beginning of the semester, a group chat was established between the current representatives and the graduate assistant to keep in contact with one another. While the idea to connect the two groups together using this group chat was discussed among the researchers, it was never established during this study.

## Findings

At the end of the semester, participants were given the same brief survey from the pre-survey that had the same six questions that used the forced Likert scale. However, there were three additional open response questions added onto the post-survey. These questions were added in order to document if there had been any impact that could be measured from a qualitative standpoint. Besides the post-survey, a 15-minute interview was given to the participants to determine if there had been any impact in their confidence. These interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting with the intention of learning more in-depth answers than the participants may have provided through the answers that they provided in the post-surveys. The data

from the post-surveys and interviews was then collected and analyzed.

While there were only two participants in this study, there were a few results that were analyzed from the collected data. The first was that there was a lack of statistical difference between the answers from pre-surveys to the post-surveys. While there was an increase in the responses from the post-surveys, the increase only went up the scale by one. Therefore, the use of any quantitative data from this study is negligible. The second result that emerged came from the open response questions in the post-surveys. While the quantitative data from the surveys was not enough to be usable for further study, the open response questions from the post-surveys provided valuable qualitative data for the study. For example, when asked how their time as representatives had shaped their outlooks as individuals, responses included how one of the representatives felt that her time had “been essential in developing professionalism” while also providing her the perspective to “start to think more as a teacher and less as a student.”

When asked whether their time as PDS representatives had provided them with advantages to become more confident as teacher candidates, responses included feeling “a sense of belonging” which enabled the participant to “feel more confident than in the beginning of the semester” from one candidate. This was somewhat different in the response from the other survey in which the participant discussed the importance of “having a support and network of professors so available for questions and discussion” and how this helped her reflecting “on how we handle every teaching situation.” Finally, when asked if there was anything that they had learned that they had learned through their time as PDS representatives that they could use in a real-world setting, answers included the importance of the development of responsibility, communicating and collaborating with others, and preparing and organizing in advance for events. Throughout these answers, categories in skills such as speaking, organization, and collaboration were noted as having increased for the representatives.

## Discussion

While this study may potentially contribute to further research of the topic, there are several limitations that occurred through this study, which may reduce the usage and should be acknowledged. Recommendations to address these limitations for future research of this topic are included as well. The first of these is that there should be more than just two participants in further studies. While the college in Western New York’s PDS Consortium can have anywhere from two to six representatives in a single academic year, the amount that were included in this study were not enough to provide substantial quantitative evidence towards future research. The authors have considered that this limitation could be addressed by conducting research over the course of multiple academic years with a larger number of representatives in order to see which traits regarding confidence occur most

frequently and under which structure. By changing the length of time for the study, the number of participants would increase which could provide greater statistical significance for future research.

Second, further research is necessary to continue with the study of this topic. Throughout the course of reading peer-reviewed published studies in order to draw upon previous studies, a paucity of previous research was found to be a pressing issue regarding the development of confidence. While there are multiple studies that detail the impact of self-efficacy upon teacher candidates, this research focused on confidence. While the two topics are similar to a point, they are not entirely the same. In order to address this for future research, it is anticipated that other PDS Consortia will take interest in this topic and take the initiative to develop their own PDS representatives. By having other colleges and universities develop their own PDS representatives, the desire for more research will increase which can potentially lead to better research for impacting the confidence of PDS representatives.

## Conclusion

The college in Western New York’s PDS strives to provide teacher candidates the opportunities and support they need to become the education leaders and role models of the future. The transitional period from student to teacher is a good time for teacher candidates to experience opportunities that can positively impact their level of confidence. By working towards enhancing the experiences of PDS representatives to impact confidence, various skills that include speaking, organization, and collaboration can all potentially be positively impacted for the representatives. The findings from this study show that there is merit to further research into this topic. If there are other PDS Consortia that are researching ways to impact the confidence of teacher candidates, then this study will hopefully provide some insight into how to best begin this in their consortium.

However, there are still limitations that were a part of this study which will need to be addressed in the future. The lack of substantial statistical data and a lack of previous current research into this topic were two major limitations to this study. Recommendations for future research to overcome these limitations would be to collect data from a larger pool of participants. This would greatly increase the amount of evidence for future study, alongside the fact that further research is necessary to develop better ways of impacting the confidence of PDS representatives. While the findings from this study could have implications regarding the impact of confidence for teacher candidates, further research is required in order to better develop the models used for future study. <sup>SUP</sup>

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