

George Mason University and Daniels Run Elementary School PDS Partnership: Growing Collaborative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the PDS partnership between George Mason University and Daniels Run Elementary School, which are located in Fairfax, Virginia. In the spring of 2020, during their fifth year together, the partnership was awarded the National Association of Professional Development Schools Exemplary PDS Award. The Mason PDS program structure as well as the unique features of this university-school partnership are described. The Mason/DRES partnership's shared mission includes a school/university culture committed to the preparation of future educators centered around active engagement in the school community (NAPDS Essential #2) as well as a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice (NAPDS Essential #4). The partnership's inquiry focus results in ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all stakeholders (NAPDS Essential #3) and engagement in and public sharing of the results of teacher inquiry (NAPDS Essential #5).

George Mason University (Mason) is a research university located in Northern Virginia in the greater Washington, D. C. metro region. As part of the School of Education in the College of Education and Human Development, the Elementary Education program provides a post-baccalaureate Masters certification teacher preparation program leading to K-6 licensure and a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Research and theory on effective teacher preparation (AACTE, 2010, 2011; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008) are cornerstones of the program. The Mason Elementary PDS program is guided by national teacher education standards (CCSSO, 2011; NCATE, 2000), state accredited, award winning (NAPDS Exemplary PDS, 2016; Groth et al., 2017), and embedded within inquiry and ongoing collaboration with partner schools.

Mason PDS Program Structure

Mason's Elementary Education Program uses a Professional Development School (PDS) model informed by research and theory on effective teacher preparation (Book, 1996; Hammerness et al., 2005; Holmes Group, 1990; NAPDS, 2008). Teacher candidates are selected through a rigorous admission process that includes a writing sample and an individual, on-campus interview conducted by a university faculty member and a school partner. Teacher candidates complete coursework that emphasizes the knowledge and theory teachers need for effective instruction (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). As part of their program, teacher candidates participate in extended field experiences and internships in diverse K-6 PDS partnership schools,

where they are placed with Advanced Mentor Teachers who are trained and prepared to mentor teacher candidates and who are committed to the PDS framework. Additionally, a University Facilitator fosters the relationship with each PDS, providing extensive mentorship and scaffolding to teacher candidates while also supporting teachers and administrators in the school through collaborative inquiry and professional development.

Within Mason's PDS network, there are various paths for engagement as partner schools, clinical practice schools, or collaborative inquiry schools—all with a shared commitment to improving K-6 education and impacting teacher preparation. These flexible pathways to partnership (Parker, Parsons, Groth, & Brown, 2016) include *Partner Schools* that host students for clinical field hours experiences. *Clinical Practice Sites* and *Collaborative Inquiry Sites* work collaboratively with all Mason Elementary PDS Network stakeholders to support final internship teacher candidates. While inquiry is an important aspect of the work in all Mason PDS sites, it is emphasized and scaffolded more fully in Collaborative Inquiry schools, fostered by the presence of a full-time university faculty who serves as University Facilitator. As a Collaborative Inquiry site, Daniels Run Elementary School (DRES) faculty purposefully engage in organic, inquiry-based research emerging from the collaborative work of Mason and school faculty as they examine their own practice and host year-long interns.

Mason/DRES Partnership

DRES's first semester of partnership consisted of hosting field experience students as a partner site. By its second semester, largely due to a visionary administrator, DRES decided to join

the ranks of Collaborative Inquiry Site, housing two classes onsite and hosting year-long interns. A number of unique features characterize the Mason/DRES partnership in terms of overcoming challenges, developing a shared mission and supporting collaborative inquiry.

Overcoming Challenges

Some of the challenges of growing a PDS at DRES result from the location and demographics of the site. DRES is a K-6 school located in the city of Fairfax, so it is guided by Fairfax County Public Schools as well as the City of Fairfax. While the school benefits from the support of two different school-boards, they also have to answer to two distinct entities. The student population of 750 students is about 30% ESOL, 14% Special Education, and 33% Free/Reduced Lunch. During its five-year tenure as a Collaborative Inquiry PDS there have been four different Assistant Principals, two different Principals, and four different Site Facilitators. The most recent administration change was during the 2018-2019 academic year, when the Principal departed in early September, one Assistant Principal left on emergency medical leave and the other left on maternity leave. For the first five months of the school year there was an "Acting Principal" assigned by Fairfax County Public schools and an Assistant Principal who was completing an internship as part of a master's program. That fall there were also 11 first-year teachers on staff, nine of whom were Mason program graduates. This presented unique challenges for the entire school.

The PDS partnership provided a consistent framework for the work of faculty, teacher educators, and teacher candidates during the turmoil. One specific example of how the partnership facilitated stakeholders during this challenging time is the additional mentoring provided for the first-year teachers. In addition to the mentoring provided by the county, these first-year teachers were invited to be included in the bi-weekly seminars held onsite for the teacher candidates. Teacher candidates are required to attend seminars, presented by University Facilitators, Site Facilitators, school faculty, or a combination of the three, twice a month at their PDS site. The first year-teachers and the teacher candidates had many similar concerns and challenges. An inquiry approach was used throughout the seminars to address the questions of the induction year teachers and the teacher candidates. These seminars provided additional professional development opportunities for the new teachers and many reported it to be more valuable and personalized than the first-year mentoring provided by the county. In addition, the newly hired teachers truly became informal mentors, gaining experience and much-needed confidence. This expanded mentoring model was so successful DRES is continuing to use it.

Shared Mission

The mission of the Mason PDS partnership in general and the Mason/DRES partnership specifically, is to take joint responsi-

bility for teacher preparation, school-based faculty development, enhanced student learning, and inquiry directed at improvement of practice and/or student learning. To that end, formal roles have been established. In addition to the University Facilitator (UF) who spends one day per week on site, there is a Site Facilitator (SF) who serves as an additional liaison between the school and the university. The SF role at Daniels Run has been fulfilled by four different teachers over five years, including a classroom teacher, two different literacy specialists and the current SF, a math specialist.

Mentor Teachers (MT) and Advanced Mentor Teachers (AMT) are school-based teacher educators who host and mentor teacher candidates. All mentor teachers complete mentoring modules and receive a stipend for mentoring teacher candidates. AMT's are school-based teacher educators who have completed an advanced mentoring course. There are five MT's and seventeen AMT's at DRES. A site-based PDS Leadership Team, including an administrator, the SF, the UF, and AMT member representative, a teacher and a teacher candidate, endeavors to meet three times per year to make decisions regarding the implementation of the PDS. The goal is to make this group proactive as opposed to reactive in nature.

Newly hired teacher candidates who completed their internship at the DRES PDS have an informal role within the PDS. In the past five years, 12 program completers have been hired at the school. The University Facilitator serves as an informal mentor to these novice teachers in their beginning years. In turn, they serve as informal mentors to the current teacher candidates. Newly hired program completers frequently engage in collaborative inquiry, sharing their work at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Professional Development Schools Conference.

NAPDS Essential #2 (NAPDS, 2008) stresses a school/university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community. One distinctive way the Mason/DRES partnership embraces this mission is by teaching methods courses onsite. Revisioning teacher preparation with clinical practice at its core breaks down barriers between the university and the school. One such innovative course structure is the integration of a literacy course and a differentiation course taught completely on site. Supported field work, structured observations, and demonstration lessons make links between theory and practice clear. Situating courses in PDS sites allows for instruction, field-based observation and reflection to occur simultaneously between all school-based stakeholders. Students are able to read about a literacy construct, observe a teacher using it, engage in a debrief about what they saw with their course instructor and ask the teacher who they just observed questions about the implementation and instructional decision-making.

Teacher candidates work in groups of three within their observation classrooms. These shared observations encourage dialogue among the teacher candidates, preparing them for a critical collaborative skill that is necessary as a future teacher.

School-based teacher educators work in concert with the university-based teacher educator to guide preservice teachers as they navigate theory-to-practice connections and address moments of dissonance as they occur. Furthermore, both the university-based and school-based teacher educator model their reflection on their own practice. This innovative structure of a site-based course engages school-based and university-based teacher educators in a joint collaborative endeavor that serves teacher candidates as well as the elementary students while inherently impacting the inservice classroom teachers' own professional development. The culture of the Mason/DRES partnership demonstrates the partnership's commitment to preparing future educators to be actively engaged in the school community by immersing them in that community early in their coursework via the innovative use of on-site courses.

NAPDS Essential #4 outlines a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants. One example of the Mason/DRES partnership's engagement in innovative, reflective practices mutually determined by PDS network stakeholders is the use of GoReact. GoReact is a video coding tool purchased by all of Mason's teacher candidates. This tool provides a forum for stakeholders to upload videos of instruction and then add real-time comments and questions to the video. Teacher candidates use GoReact throughout their coursework. During internship, teacher candidates are required to upload videos of informal and formal observations adding reflective commentary. AMTs and the UF provide feedback after the teacher candidates post. GoReact is accessible to teacher candidates, AMTs, and UFs, thereby facilitating conversations about instruction and a common understanding of effective practice among all stakeholders. Feedback on the use of GoReact from these stakeholders continues to help evolve and refine the use of video coding by the Mason/DRES partners.

Most recently, the partnership has expanded the use of video-coding through guided observation cycles. These cycles involve teacher candidate dyads doing focused observations of their AMTs. During the fall of their internship year, the teacher candidates study their AMTs' teacher language, transitions, focus lessons, and small group instruction. Using guidelines collaboratively developed by the UF and the AMTs the dyads focus on one of the aforementioned teaching topics at a time and observe each other's AMTs; debrief those observations with the AMTs and the UF; videotape their own implementation of the topic; reflect on the video of their attempt; share and discuss their videos during seminars. Some AMTs have agreed to be videotaped by the teacher candidates to spark additional conversation about what these topics can look like. This shared reflection creates a learning laboratory that uses teaching episodes by teacher candidates and/or AMTs to foster critical reflection focused on linking theory and practice. Shared reflection will foster teacher candidates' and their school-based teachers' professional growth, which will positively impact their K-6 learners.

Supporting Collaborative Inquiry

DRES opted to partner as a Collaborative Inquiry site, embracing the shared mission of the broader Mason PDS, including a focus on inquiry. Action research is required of all the teacher candidates as part of the elementary program capstone class. The teacher candidates carry out their capstone action research during independent teaching during the spring semester. Four years ago, a pair of DRES kindergarten advanced mentor teachers became intrigued by action research as they supported their teacher candidates through the process. Early in the fall semester, the UF volunteered to work with the interested kindergarten teachers to teach them about action research and support them in their own research endeavors. Thus, the first action research team began. The team of four kindergarten teachers, one teacher candidate, and the ESOL teacher met once per week before or after school. Meetings were devoted to addressing intervention pedagogy, data collection protocol, data analysis, and results. The teachers used similar interventions and collected and analyzed data on their own classes.

In anticipation of the NAPDS conference being held in Washington, DC, the partnership decided to "formalize" their work and make it public. This initial foray into action research resulted in the investigation of what happened to the lowest achieving kindergarten readers when shared reading was made more purposeful, work the kindergarten team, the SF, and the UF disseminated at the NAPDS conference in 2017 (Groth et al., 2017). Since 2017 the kindergarten team has engaged in collaborative inquiry annually, exploring interactive read alouds for multiple years.

The DRES kindergarten team's work with interactive read alouds resulted in PDS-wide addressing this literacy construct. During the second yearlong action research project undertaken by the team, the UF, who is also a literacy professor, attended the kindergarten Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) meetings in literacy. Through carefully selected readings, guided discussions and needs assessment the group decided they wanted to see a demonstration of an Interactive Read Aloud (IRA). The UF co-planned a lesson with the kindergarten team and then implemented it in one of the kindergarten classrooms. Teacher candidates were also invited to observe and the lesson was videotaped. During the debrief the teachers were able to question and reflect on the implementation. Later, the UF went back to comment on the video to address the questions and highlight pertinent aspects of the IRA. The kindergarten group and the teacher candidates have the video as a resource.

Through ongoing work in the literacy CLTs the reading teacher asked the UF to demonstrate an IRA at a different grade level. Over the ensuing months the cycle of CLT discussion, co-planning, demonstration lesson, debrief was repeated across all grade levels. The reading teacher recognized a need and worked with the UF to design professional development to meet the needs of teachers, teacher candidates and specialists. Developing a shared understanding of the IRA literacy construct fosters a school-wide vision for effective use of this instructional context.

The kindergarten team continued to explore and expand their use of IRA's in future action research. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need is the focus of NAPDS essential #3.

The kindergarten team has engaged in action research annually for the past four years, presenting their work at NAPDS, sharing it with both the Fairfax County Public Schools and the Fairfax City school boards as well as at the Elementary Program Teaching Innovations and Practical Strategies (TIPS) symposium where Mason students share their action research. Over the years, there have been additional action research groups meeting regularly under the guidance of the UF, spreading inquiry to grades one, two, and four. Two ESOL teachers are working in conjunction with the kindergarten team making the inquiry truly collaborative among all stakeholders. The group has two CLT meetings per week. They have set aside a block of time in one of the weekly CLTs to address their action research. Inquiry has become a natural part of their teaching. All of the teachers on the team recognize how teacher inquiry and student assessment complement each other. The teacher candidates who work with the kindergarten team benefit from an early introduction to teaching as inquiry. Two have been sparked to join the team's work and present their findings at the student research session at the NAPDS conference.

Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants describes NAPDS essential #5. This is a hallmark of a Collaborative Inquiry site in the Mason PDS model. The close relationship and shared governance of the Mason/DRES partnership encourages collaborative inquiry making it a key piece of the Mason/DRES PDS mission. The partnership employs ongoing use of and engagement in action research which continues to expand and grow. Various stakeholders, including AMTs, the UF, the SF, and teacher candidates disseminate findings across the network, locally, and nationally. Presentations at local and national conferences allow for additional professional development opportunities as they make the partnership's PDS work public.

Teacher candidates engage in their own inquiry-based projects during the independent teaching portion of their internship. They share their findings school-wide as well as at a university symposium. Two teacher candidates in the past three years have shared their work via the student presentations at the NAPDS national conference. The kindergarten teachers were the first to engage in collaborative inquiry. It was the work of the teacher candidates that initially sparked the kindergarten teachers' interest in engaging in inquiry. A number of additional factors prompted a shift in stance. Grade level teams were required to hold weekly Collaborative Learning Team meetings alternating from week to week in literacy and math. With the support of the UF, who began attending the literacy CLTs, the kindergarten CLT meetings moved from being focused primarily on day-to-day planning, pacing, and instructional logistics to focusing more on discussion of research on pedagogy, discussion and monitoring of student progress, and analysis/discussion/

selection of instructional materials. Questions rose organically from these discussions.

Two years ago, as the kindergarten team investigated how to engage second language learners in book club discussions, the ESOL specialists joined the kindergarten action research team. Over time, additional teachers have collaborated with the UF to design their own inquiry. The first mixed group consisted of two first grade teachers, one second grade teacher and a fourth-grade teacher. Three of these four teachers are program completers with prior experience doing teacher inquiry in their capstone course. The result of more teachers embracing an inquiry stance is an increase in publications. There have been thirteen NAPDS conference research presentations and publications directly resulting from inquiry work done by stakeholders in the Mason/DRES PDS partnership since 2016. While the partnership is proud of its efforts to make their PDS work public, they are even more proud of the increasing number of faculty and teacher candidates, who are sharing the vision of teaching and research being inexorably linked, embracing inquiry.

Conclusion

A rich culture of partnership between DRES and Mason has enabled the professional development school to flourish over the five years since its inception. Despite challenges, including abrupt administration changes, collaboration, and the inquiry stance of this PDS have provided a consistent and enduring framework for the work of teachers and school-based teacher educators, school administration, university-based teacher educators, and teacher candidates alike. A strong shared mission and mutual support of and commitment to developing a culture of collaborative inquiry are essential components of the partnership's foundation. While the NAPDS Exemplary PDS Award earned by the partnership in 2020 might be seen as a "feather in their cap," it is certainly not a capstone. There is much more school-university partnership work to be done. ^{SUP}

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