PDS and the Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Creating a Virtual Third Space

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ABSTRACT: This article describes how one PDS Partnership met the challenges and demands of the Covid-19 pandemic and how these challenges impacted all members of our partnership. Creating a virtual third space was a learning curve for all of us and took collaborative problem solving and support for one another. Each of the challenges of creating a virtual space (communications, virtual PK-12 classrooms, virtual methods courses and seminars, equity issues and state mandated certification requirements) are described and linked to the PDS Nine Essentials.

NAPDS Nine Essentials: Essential 1 – A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; Essential 2 – A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; Essential 3 – Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; Essential 4 – Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings;

Our university and local school districts moved to fully virtual instruction, meetings and offices in the middle of March, requiring a swift transformation of our PDS. Business was clearly not "Business as Usual" and these were not normal times. During normal times, our PDS Network bases its work on several documents including two national position papers: *What it Means to Be a Professional Development School* (NAPDS, 2008) and *A Pivot Toward Clinical Practice, Its Lexicon, and the Renewal of Educator Preparation* (AACTE, 2018). Our university is based in the state of Maryland, where we are also guided by the document, *Professional Development Schools: An Implementation Manual* (MSDE, 2003). We border two worlds, the national movements of the National Association for Professional Development Schools and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), and a formal structure in Maryland to meet PDS standards based on the former National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Association (2001) standards with a requirement that we meet these standards and that all students complete a minimum yearlong internship of 100 days.

PDS Before the Pandemic

Over the past 20 years, our PDS Network developed programs that define our collaborative work across nine PDS sites, two school districts and our university College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences. Our initial certification programs include elementary education, early childhood/special education, and secondary education. These signature programs provide the vision for our collaboration across partnerships and programs.

Our PDS is perhaps unique in our commitment to boundary spanning roles. PDS teachers and administrators are often on our campus serving on committees and panels. When a university faculty member is not available to teach one of our methods courses, a PDS teacher fills this position. Currently four out of five methods courses are instructed by PDS teachers and are taught on-site at one of our PDSs. This affords us the opportunity to work with PK-12 students in a reading clinic format and to offer science clubs and math clubs during methods courses.

We are also heavily immersed in supporting an inquiry model on campus and in our PDSs through inquiry groups for teachers and teacher candidates. These have been successful for the past 15 years. Our teacher candidates conduct action research in their mentor teachers' classrooms during their fulltime internship, and our mentor teachers conduct action research as an assignment as part of our 4-session mentoring series.

Our teacher candidates participate in a yearlong internship with a minimum of 100 days over two semesters. During phase one, they are with their mentor teacher two days a week while completing methods courses. During phase two, they are at their PDS site with their mentor teacher daily. The two culminating assignments during phase two are the presentation of their action research and the completion of an exit e-portfolio based on the college's conceptual framework.

As the PDS Network Coordinator for my university, I serve as a liaison between the PDS sites, the university, the state department of education and the local school districts to bring partners together in a collaborative spirit to innovate and make decisions. In my role, I work with university and PDS faculty to create methods courses that link the pedagogy to school district curricula that connect and enhance student learning at the individual PDS sites. I spearhead the inquiry focus that our PDS Network has adopted as a signature program for pre-service and

in-service teachers. Additionally, I am able to respond to the needs expressed by mentor teachers to learn more about the mentoring process by co-developing and revising yearly our mentoring workshop series. I am the bridge between institutions to respond to their needs.

On March 13, 2020 I sat in a small room shoulder-to-shoulder with colleagues facing the news of transforming our PDS to a virtual format (campus and school districts) with little anticipation of what was to come.

The Concerns-Based Adoption Model

As a teacher educator, I often turn to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM; Loucks-Horsley, 2001) to explain how we as educators face change and innovation. CBAM is a widely applied theory and methodology for studying the process of implementing educational change by teachers and persons acting in change-facilitating roles. I have found this model to be useful in helping new and veteran teachers understand the many levels of concern that must be addressed when adopting a new instructional practice. But with such an abrupt change brought on by COVID-19, I struggled to use the principles of change and the innovations needed to meet the changes. CBAM advocates change as a process, not an event; the single most important factor in the change process is the people who will be most affected by the change. How would concerns about the changes and needed innovations of moving to a virtual campus be predictable and not forced? How would they occur in a developmental manner with emphasis on people? How would we as a PDS Network move through the informational concerns by providing clear and accurate information, as well as addressing personal concerns, management concerns, consequence concerns, and collaborative concerns? At the time, all I could think about was my own personal concern, what do I need from my office to keep doing my job over the next few weeks. I packed three bags and left for home, not knowing a few weeks would turn into months. I would soon learn the reality of creating a virtual third space.

Third Space and PDS

The concept of third space is an interesting lens for viewing PDS partnerships. Zeichner (2010) refers to this third space as a hybrid space in teacher education where university and public-school partners build communities that are less hierarchical and more democratic and inclusive ways for partnerships to educate teacher candidates. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2018) uses the lens of third space to explain the Infrastructure Proclamation where there are clear structures providing direction while nurturing equity and inclusivity between universities and their partner schools. Their report provides a model where the first space is the PK-12 school, the second space is the educator preparation program, and the third space is the intersection of educator preparation program and PK-12 school interaction.

How then would the move to virtual school districts and university partnerships impact our third space? It would take months to begin to fully understand the complexity of this altered third space and the challenges we faced. Now, four months later, I am able to reflect on the many lessons learned during this tumultuous time.

Lessons Learned in the Virtual Third Space

Lesson Learned: Virtual meetings bring benefits to busy partners. Our PDS Network meets monthly and consists of site-based PDS coordinators, supervisors, methods faculty, teacher candidates, and principals. Because we work with nine PDS sites in close proximity to one another and to the university, we have previously relied solely on face-to-face meetings.

For a PDS Network who used face-to-face interactions for meetings, supervision, planning and boundary spanning roles, our first challenge was in actually creating an altered third space in which to meet. What we all had in common was email. We quickly learned that we could use Zoom for our meetings with great success in supporting robust conversations and joy in seeing one another. Zoom gave us a way to stay in touch and work through the upcoming challenges together in the true spirit of our PDS Network. Because there were so many details to determine, we ended up meeting every three weeks rather than once a month.

Surprisingly, we found that attendance actually increased when we switched to virtual meetings. We have become more interested in adding enhanced virtual opportunities in our PDS Network and are considering a permanent, post-COVID change to virtual monthly meetings as a norm, with three in-person meetings per year.

Lesson Learned: PDS is about relationships, collaboration and working in a third space with boundary spanning roles. For our very first Zoom meeting shortly after the move to virtual instruction, I had a hefty agenda. I wanted to discuss how mentor teachers would work with their teacher candidates, how our teacher candidates would finish conducting their action research, and ideas for continuing our site-based inquiry groups. My agenda was met with silence, and the conversation did not begin until one of the site-based PDS coordinators and a former student of mine said, "We don't even know how to teach our own students virtually." Then the conversation moved to concerns about teaching our PK-12 students and having our own children at home to teach. These were concerns centered on family members and health, with a pervasive sense of being overwhelmed. I realized that even though this change to remote teaching and learning was abrupt, CBAM was still a useful way to view this conversation about personal concerns and to use my leadership role to understand the challenges of this change thrust upon us. CBAM (Loucks-Horsley, 2001) curtailed my anxiety and frustration by helping me understand that our partners were thinking of personal and management concerns and that it was too early to move to consequence and collaboration concerns.

We met three weeks later and, by then, teachers had been trained to teach virtually in Google classrooms. The school district had provided the support they needed to teach, and they felt more prepared in sharing this knowledge with their teacher candidates.

This experience re-grounded us in the most important work of PDS. Essential One (NAPDS, 2008) calls for a comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner. Our collaborative partnership was built on this premise as we joined with nine PDS sites across two school districts to increase PK-12 learning, provide teacher candidates with a clinically rich internship and provide dual renewal for all partners through collaboratively sponsored and planned professional development opportunities and boundary spanning roles. Essential Two (NAPDS, 2008) emphasizes the commitment to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community. Our mentor teachers first wanted to ensure that they understood how to teach in a virtual environment before shepherding their teacher candidates in this transition. What evolved, however, was a vibrant learning community where teacher candidates and teachers alike discovered and shared practices that were working. These two essentials served to ground our work together, becoming even more "essential" as we moved into our altered third space.

Lesson Learned: Our teacher candidates report that their experience of teaching both in person and virtually prepared them to teach anywhere and in any circumstances. They feel professionally stronger and more confident teaching in varied environments. Essential Three (NAPDS, 2008) calls for ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need. Our shared commitment over the years to professional development supported our move to virtual P-12 classrooms.

As a PDS Network, we were faced with daunting questions. How would the triad of mentor teacher, intern, and supervisor move forward in this new third space? Within several weeks the two school districts where our students are placed provided extensive professional development on teaching virtually. Our first major challenge was to work with the school districts to insure access into these virtual classrooms. After our PDS Network Meeting, both school districts made this happen in a matter of days. We provided email addresses to teacher candidates so that they could participate in the virtual classroom. However, we could not do this for our university supervisors due to various legal challenges, so more responsibility fell to the mentor teacher. In order to mentor an intern in our PDS site, teachers are required to complete a 4-session workshop, Teach-Coach-Reflect. This requirement has created a richer clinical experience for our teacher candidates and mentor teachers, and during the shutdowns, mentor teachers leaned heavily on the skills they learned in Teach-Coach-Reflect. We believe that this mentoring workshop sustained many of the mentor teacher-intern collaborations.

What did these collaborations look like? In one secondary history class, the mentor teacher reported that the intern videotaped a weekly lesson accompanied by discussion questions. This intern also took the lead in teaching the Social Issue class, and the mentor teacher-intern pair began each week with collaborative planning. Another mentor teacher reported that he and his intern centered their class on weekly podcasts that the intern created and shared with other teachers at the PDS site. In an elementary PDS site, teacher candidates took the lead in planning virtual field trips and conducting read alouds across disciplines.

One PDS site-based coordinator, who also serves as a mentor teacher, explained that she was spending more time planning and offering tech support to parents who were helping their children. Her intern took the lead in emailing parents with updates on their student's progress. This site-based PDS coordinator reported that not one mentor teacher complained about mentoring in the virtual classroom and that collaborations became stronger. In addition, at this PDS site, additional teachers have requested to mentor teacher candidates in the fall.

In one situation, a mentor intern relationship did not thrive. In speaking with the intern on how it was going, she reported that going virtual distanced the relationship even more. When asked about how she accessed the professional development from the school district, this math intern reported that a "social studies teacher on her team took me under her wing." Although this is less than ideal, our network believes that the entire school is the PDS, not just the mentor teachers, so this was a welcome move.

At the beginning, even the most successful mentor teacher-intern collaborations were overwhelming in the altered third space. One PDS site-based coordinator commented that the monthly PDS Network meeting built a framework for honest communications and support that she could take back to her PDS site.

Our teacher candidates and mentor teachers met the challenges of virtual clinical practice, and many of the teacher candidates remained with their mentor teachers after their official last day. Grade level teams and content teams came out to fully support the teacher candidates. Meetings and professional development opportunities for teacher candidates have continued, and teacher candidates report greater feelings of efficacy for teaching anywhere and in any circumstances.

Lesson Learned: Be flexible and open to adjusting assignments and presentations. Essential Eight (NAPDS, 2008) provides language that supports work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings. With clearly defined formal and informal roles and boundary spanning roles, we found our commitment to Essential Eight helpful in working in our third space.

We used Zoom to conduct a bi-weekly student teaching seminar with our teacher candidates and university supervisors. These teacher candidates were preparing for graduation, and that presented certification challenges. Since the supervisors were unable to join the virtual PDS classrooms, these seminars took on a different nature as teacher candidates and mentor

teachers could only report to the supervisors how things were going. Due to legal issues, we were not able to require video clips in this new virtual environment.

Methods courses presented extensive challenges as they all met weekly face-to-face in a PDS site, and in several cases involved tutoring and demonstration lessons with elementary after school clubs. PDS teachers serving as adjunct faculty taught three of the five methods classes. The university hosted two days of training on Blackboard to assist instructors with making the transition to fully online instruction. One of the methods faculty was teaching the literacy course for the first time. Full-time faculty reached out to our PDS adjunct faculty to assist with the transition.

Exit requirements were co-constructed by university faculty, teacher candidates, site-based PDS coordinators, and university supervisors to meet the challenges of the new third space. Our teacher candidates were able to present their exit e-portfolios on Zoom to a panel. Many of our students were unable to complete their action research, and we revised the assignment to be an action research proposal with the hope that they would carry out their research during their first year of teaching.

Lesson Learned: We can work together to support one another in difficult times. The pandemic forced us to face serious issues of our safety and the safety of others, childcare, financial stresses, and family challenges. Like other universities, we struggled with equity issues at our university and in our PDS sites. According to Thought Leaders (2018), to achieve equity in education, one must consider outcomes, resource funding, and academic support. The Nine Essentials address equity issues in several of the essentials. Essential One states,

> A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension the broader community.

This essential strongly suggests the improvement of PK-12 learning as well as an all-inclusive promotion of professional growth across the continuum of pre-service teacher candidates, in-service educators, and college/university faculty and administrators.

Equity became a challenge for us in working with our teacher candidates and PK-12 students. Some did not have access to technology or Internet. We worked together as a PDS Network to identify the challenges and provide technology. The university identified hotspots on campus parking lots. PDS sites provided learning packets to those students who did not have access to Internet. The school district set up areas where parents could receive Chromebooks for their children.

Some of our teacher candidates and families in our PDS schools were unable to work and began experiencing hardships. We collaborated on ways to care for one another. The university kept the food banks open for students, and the school districts opened food banks and provided meals to children and families. We communicated as a PDS Network to be sure that everyone was safe, had what they needed, and knew that we were all working together across institutions to make the altered third space work.

Lesson Learned: Even seemingly insurmountable challenges can be overcome. The Maryland State Department of Education (2003) requirements for certification and the redesign of teacher education presented challenges that we thought to be insurmountable. Our state requirements for certification and for graduation at our university include "an extensive internship (at least 100 days over two consecutive semesters)" (p. 10). In addition, our teacher candidates must pass Praxis for certification as well as graduation.

What seemed to cause the most challenge to our PDS Network was the uncertainty of the new normal. In order to combat this, the university supervisors met every Monday morning to ensure that the graduating seniors were being successful. The site-based PDS coordinators met with teacher candidates and mentor teachers on an ongoing basis. These meeting culminated in our PDS Network Meetings. We experienced greater communication than before the pandemic, and we found opportunities for enhanced collaboration. During our virtual one-day summer strategic planning session, we will spend time reflecting on our transition to a virtual third space, and we have a plan to involve the voices of mentor teachers, teacher candidates, and a sampling of PK-12 students.

Perhaps our greatest challenge was meeting the state requirement for our graduating seniors. We were asked to provide evidence that the 100-day requirement was met. Working with PDS site-based coordinators, supervisors, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates, we were able to identify how many days each of our interns were lacking and created a tracking system to verify their remaining days in the virtual PDS classrooms. While it sounds so simple now, the uncertainty of what the state expectation was and how we would meet it was a challenge.

The state eventually waived the Praxis requirement for graduating seniors and offered a two-year window for passing. This has allowed our students to meet all our graduation requirements. We all look forward to our virtual commencement ceremony and learning where our students will be teaching.

Looking Ahead

Although we do not yet know whether schools will be meeting in person or virtually in the fall, our PDS network is more committed than ever to pooling our resources and pursuing innovative ideas in order to meet the needs of PK-12 students, our teacher candidates, and one another. We are convinced that a third space can be created wherever needed to enable the work of PDS to thrive. SUP

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