Making an Inquiry Community the Core of a PDS: Learning Together Across Institutional Boundaries and Roles

Rachel Wolkenhauer, Department of Curriculum & Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University
Logan Rutten, Department of Curriculum & Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University
Azaria Cunningham, Department of Curriculum & Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University
Yun-chen Yen, Department of Curriculum & Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University

ABSTRACT: This article presents a case in point of an inquiry community in a professional development school (PDS). The community (supported by an "Inquiry in the PDS" graduate seminar) spanned institutional boundaries and involved a range of PDS partners who collaboratively studied their own practices. The article describes the community and shares insights reported by eight participants. Four lessons were learned from the participants' insights: first, that making an inquiry community a core mechanism for collaboration in a PDS can transform existing relationships; second, that an inquiry community can be used to build purposeful connections among and beyond PDS partners; third, that an inquiry community can offer PDS partners opportunities to fashion new professional identities; and fourth, that inquiry communities can develop new understandings of what it means to be a "PDS partner." The article's core contribution is an example of how an inquiry community can support partnering in PDS work.

Relevant NAPDS 9 Essentials: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7

This article describes lessons learned from an inquiry community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) that included a group of professional development school (PDS) partners with varying roles within a longstanding partnership. The National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2021) describes a PDS as "a living, learning community intended to close conceptual and practical separations that tend to exist between teacher education programs and the nation's schools" (p. 10). As communities characterized more by common values, commitments, and traditions than by the common policies that characterize organizations (Badiali, 2019, 2020; NAPDS 2021), PDSs are well-positioned to convene community members from disparate institutional role identities (Burns & Baker, 2016) as partners who learn together through reflection and inquiry. However, the PDS movement has long acknowledged (e.g., Brindley et al., 2008; Teitel, 1998) the challenges inherent in creating learning communities that actually involve all community members.

As PDSs navigate a "pivot" toward clinically based teacher preparation (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2018), many partnerships have focused their efforts on supporting the learning of teacher candidates. While high-quality teacher preparation is one vital activity within any PDS (NAPDS Essential 2), scholars have recently reminded the PDS movement that the ideals of simultaneous renewal (Goodlad, 1994) also require ongoing learning from all partners (Howell et al., 2021; Wangemann, 2021). The broader field of teacher education has simultaneously acknowledged a need for more research about the professional learning of teacher educators (Loughran, 2011; Rutten & Badiali, 2020; Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2021; Yendol-Hoppey, et al., 2019; Zeichner, 2005). One approach to supporting the learning of a wider range of PDS partners is to create and sustain an inquiry community that is continually engaged in the cyclical process of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020; Rutten, 2021b).

Background

We, the authors of this paper, are teacher educators (tenure-line faculty and doctoral students) in a PDS consisting of a longstanding relationship between a research-intensive university and its local school district. The mission of our partnership (NAPDS Essential 1) is to create and maintain a community of teacher candidates, in-service teachers, and teacher educators who strive to engage all partners, including P-12 school students, in continuous learning, reflection, and innovation through respectful, collaborative inquiry. One PDS activity that helps us carry out this mission is to support a robust program of clinically based teacher preparation (Essential 2). However, our PDS recently confronted a local trend, reflected nationally (United States Department of Education, 2021), which threatened this core program: a decline in teacher candidates interested in completing the intensive, yearlong clinical

Table 1.   Seminar Schedule

Parts in the Seminar	Approximate Length of Time	Major Topics
Part 1: Situating Ourselves in the Field	3 Weeks	• Professional Identity Work and Community Building: Who am *I* as an educator and who are *we* are PDS partners? • The State of the Field: Teacher Education Today and the Role of School-University Partnerships • The Theoretical Foundations of Practitioner Inquiry: Situating Inquiry within Teacher Education and School-University Partnerships
Part 2: Inquiring into Our Practices	10 Weeks	• Contextualizing Inquiry and Research Question Development • Designing Data Collection • Making Plans for Data Collection • Practicing Data Collection • Designing Data Analysis • Data Analysis
Part 3: Taking Action and Sharing	3 Weeks	• Developing Action Plans • Sharing Inquiry

internships our PDS offers. We chose to address this problem through inquiry-based decision making (Essential 7).

Our inquiry into low enrollments, reported elsewhere (Wolkenhauer, et al., 2020b), directly addressed our immediate dilemma, and it also generated several implications that have advanced our work. PDS stakeholders' dedication to working collaboratively through this problem of practice reaffirmed the strength of our community, even in the face of a serious challenge. Recognizing this strength led us to create an inquiry community within a new PDS structure—a graduate seminar named "Inquiry in the PDS"—to support partners in living out our mission across institutional boundaries and varying roles. In the following sections, we present a conceptual overview of practitioner inquiry within inquiry communities, then describe our particular inquiry community. Next, we synthesize eight participants' reflections about their experiences in the community. We conclude by sharing lessons we learned that could inform the broader field of PDS scholarship.

Conceptual Overview

The work we describe in this article took place within an inquiry community that used practitioner inquiry as a tool for learning together. In this section, therefore, practitioner inquiry is defined, and the importance of community for sustaining inquiry is highlighted. Practitioner inquiry is the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own professional practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009). Drawing upon a cyclical process theorized by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020), educators engaged in practitioner inquiry pose wonderings sparked by "felt difficulties and real-world dilemmas" (p. 27). They intentionally produce and systematically analyze a wide range of data sources related to professional practices and student learning (e.g., student work, standardized test scores, interviews, reflective journals, lesson plans, professional literature), and take actions that reflect their new learning, which they share with others in and/or beyond their communities.

The concept of community is central to sustaining potentially transformative inquiry over time. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) emphasized:

> A core part of the knowledge and expertise necessary for transforming practice and enhancing students' learning resides in the questions, theories, and strategies generated collectively by practitioners themselves and in their joint interrogations of the knowledge, practices, and theories of others. (p. 124)

As rich contexts for practitioner learning, inquiry communities can motivate educators to bring varied perspectives from local contexts and scholarly research into novel contact in ways that challenge prevailing assumptions about schooling, link with larger change efforts, and uncover the complexity of teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The "Inquiry in the PDS" seminar was designed to be such an inquiry community for our PDS.

The Graduate Seminar: Inquiry in the PDS

For over two decades, our PDS has thrived on the shared value of collaborative inquiry as a way to engage all partners in learning for renewal. In Fall 2019, a group of PDS partners—including ourselves—with varying, yet interconnected, roles and affiliations came together in a graduate seminar to conduct inquiries into our practices in the PDS. In the 16-week, 3-credit seminar, we engaged in inquiry cycles to investigate the challenges, joys, and opportunities for renewal in our PDS (see Tables 1 and 2). Partners came into the seminar with varying degrees of experience with inquiry and with different expectations about how inquiry would support their professional lives. Therefore, when the seminar began, we took time to situate ourselves within the fields of teacher education and school-university partnerships so that we could more purposefully collaborate in our inquiries. In doing so, we were also able to

Table 2.   Seminar Participants by PDS Role and Inquiry Topics Pursued

Seminar Participants	University Enrollment Status	Inquiry Topics
K-8 classroom teachers (without formalized PDS roles)	Earning M.Ed. degrees and/or professional development points for state recertification	• Social-emotional learning in 3rd grade • Classroom management • Engaging gifted learners • Student-driven inquiry in middle grades social studies
K-8 school-based teacher educators (classroom teachers with formalized roles as PDS mentor teachers or supervisors)	Earning M.Ed. degrees and/or professional development points for state recertification	• Personal and professional growth • Student growth through movement
Doctoral students in teacher education (without formalized PDS roles)	Earning Ph.D. degrees and proposing to conduct dissertation studies in the PDS	• Identity; role as graduate student and teacher educator • Defining social justice • Social-emotional learning • Interviewing practices • Teacher candidates' emotions in their learning journeys • Evolving perceptions of identity
University-based teacher educators (with formalized PDS roles)	Auditing the seminar for voluntary professional development	• Teacher candidates' reflections & identity development

develop plans to act upon our learning and pursue opportunities to share our local insights more broadly (Wolkenhauer, et al., 2020a; 2020c).

Seminar Participants' Insights on "Inquiry in the PDS"

At the end of the semester, we invited all seminar participants to reflect on their experiences. Eight of 15 participants reflected in a shared Google Document as a way to generate deeper insights into using an inquiry community for professional learning in a PDS. To further inform our own practices as teacher educators and PDS partners, and to develop deeper knowledge of inquiry communities, we analyzed the participants' reflections. In this section, we describe participants' (all names are pseudonyms) insights about their experiences in the inquiry community.

For Amy (doctoral student), the experience of inquiring within the community meant she had the space to practice and craft her identity as a university-based teacher educator by staying connected with school-based colleagues through vulnerable, honest dialogue that was made possible through inquiry. She was able to stay connected to her "past self" (a classroom teacher) and "new self" (teacher education doctoral student). This mattered because she and her PDS colleagues formed new kinds of relationships that opened up possibilities for professional advocacy. In her new identity as a teacher educator, Amy assisted and empowered other PDS colleagues in standing up for themselves but also for their students, through the lens of her past identity as a classroom teacher.

For Ben (doctoral student), the experience of inquiring within the community meant that his perspective on who could be a PDS partner was challenged and reformulated. Through his inquiry, he connected with others in ways that generated new knowledge about what it means to be a PDS partner. This experience mattered for him because it meant that he was

supported to practice new skills, get feedback, and be encouraged that his inquiry held value for PDS partners beyond himself.

For Carrie (university-based teacher educator), the experience of inquiring within the community meant feeling connected to others during a time of intense exhaustion, overwork, and overextension. Inquiring and learning in community had long been motivating for Carrie. It mattered so much to her that she attempted to recruit and identify funding sources so that other PDS partners could participate in the seminar even before she knew whether or not she herself could commit to participating.

For Dakota (4th grade teacher), the experience of inquiring within the community meant that she was supported through diverse perspectives to question and evaluate her practice as a classroom teacher. This experience mattered for her because it empowered her to transition from using inquiry as a means of surviving in her own classroom, to using inquiry as a mechanism for challenging her own beliefs and practices. She was able to do this in relation not only to the local systems in which she was participating but also more broadly by connecting with educators beyond the school district.

For Emily (university-based teacher educator), the experience of inquiring within the community meant that she could continue to share and learn with others even though she had recently completed her formal education and taken on a new role as a full-time university instructor. This mattered because it provided her a new vision for the types of research and learning that our PDS could accomplish together.

For Katie (doctoral student), the experience of inquiring within the community meant establishing trusting relationships with fellow inquirers coming from different roles, life experiences, and perspectives. These new relationships helped her gain confidence with her selection of a topic for inquiry and envision a wider range of possibilities for future inquiries.

For Melody (doctoral student), the experience of inquiring within the community meant that she could be herself within the PDS when, previously, she had not believed that she would be accepted. She acknowledged that it was difficult to join a new community and to be vulnerable, but that she was thankful she had done so.

For Sarah (university-based teacher educator), the experience of inquiring within the community meant that she felt supported and motivated to inquire into her practice as a teacher educator. She gave herself permission to inquire into her own passions, and, as she did so, she began to identify ways to connect those passions to shared inquiries with others. This mattered because she was able to strengthen her practice as a teacher educator in ways that were important to her individually and to the PDS more broadly.

Lessons Learned

The first lesson we learned from the seminar participants' reflections was that because they had such varying roles, they needed time and support to develop relationships in order to feel accepted and challenged. Through a series of reflections and opportunities to build community, participants explored how their diverse personal and professional backgrounds could develop a shared understanding of one another and how this might shape the process of inquiring together. For instance, it took time for Amy, in her new role as a university-based teacher educator, to connect with school-based colleagues. As she did so, however, Amy found colleagues eager to inquire together and who invited her into their classrooms where she worked to develop her skills as an instructional coach. Through this process, Amy forged strong relationships with three teachers, in particular, and together they merged their inquiries to focus on advocating for student needs. The trusting relationships formed during the seminar allowed participants like Amy to be vulnerable enough to open up their practices and invite others to challenge them as they began to formulate wonderings. As they did so, they became increasingly confident that their inquiries mattered and were worthwhile.

Second, we learned there is a particular power in individual inquiries when they are situated within an inquiry community. Especially during the times when participants were developing their wonderings, it became important for them to notice the value of their interconnected perspectives. As participants began making connections between their own inquiries and the inquiries of others, they saw the ways individual inquiries could reach across contexts and influence the work of others, even those who had very different roles. At the start of the seminar, Melody, a university-based teacher educator whose inquiry involved defining social justice in the context of this PDS, had felt isolated from other PDS partners, and school-based colleagues in particular. As she collaborated with other participants to frame her wondering and collect data, however, she not only found her inquiry welcomed but began to identify points of connection between her inquiry and the inquiries of others, who

encouraged her and offered support. Inquiry supported participants as they connected the local/global, specific/general, and theory/practice aspects of their individual interests.

Third, we learned that the inquiry community provided space to craft new identities. Surfacing an array of different identities as participants developed relationships allowed individuals to consider new possibilities for their professional identities. Although PDSs often cause dissonance in role identity (Burns & Badiali, 2019; Burns & Baker, 2016), the seminar gave participants permission to bridge different aspects of their identities (e.g., former middle school teacher, emerging teacher educator, doctoral student, and PDS partner) and in some cases form new, more nuanced identities related to their work in the PDS. Emily, for example, found that the inquiry community assisted her in connecting a new role identity as a university instructor to a more familiar learner identity as a recent graduate of the university's doctoral program.

Fourth, we learned to broaden our definition of "PDS partner." For several partners, who had not previously been assigned to formal roles in the PDS, inquiring together provided a way for them to legitimize their participation in the partnership. Ben lacked a formalized role in the PDS, such as teacher educator or supervisor. By participating in the inquiry community, however, he found that understanding himself as one of the PDS's fellow learners was a way that he could be accepted as a PDS partner and define the terms of his participation in the PDS for himself. Conceptualizing inquiry as a way to be a PDS partner helped us define our work in the PDS as the work of a learning community where new forms of engagement are recognized as both welcome and significant for the community's continued growth.

Implications

The lessons that we learned from analyzing participants' insights into their inquiry community implicate our continued work in our own PDS, as well as the broader field of PDS scholarship. In particular, we found that making inquiry the basis for collaboration within our diverse community changed our relationships, our sense of purposeful connection, the possibilities in our professional identities, and our shared understanding of what it means to partner in PDS work.

Inquiry is a signature pedagogy for many PDSs. With this comes the expectation that to be a PDS partner is to participate in inquiry. In our PDS, however, the study and practice of inquiry was infrequent outside clinical internship seminars specifically designated for teacher candidates. The practice of inquiry has, over time, become tightly connected to formalized PDS roles. For instance, teacher candidates complete practitioner inquiry projects as a part of their clinical internship seminar; mentor teachers support teacher candidates in those inquiries and occasionally pursue inquires of their own; and teacher educators coach teacher candidates' inquiries but rarely engage in the process for themselves. Although inquiry has potential to bring PDS communities together in learning, as Ben had

experienced, it can also become inadvertently exclusive when associated too closely with formalized roles.

The inquiry community formed in the graduate seminar placed inquiry at the core of our PDS. The community was formed not based on formalized PDS roles, but on learning together about and from the process of inquiry—regardless of PDS role designation or experience with practitioner inquiry. In fact, while the details are outside the scope of this article, the seminar strategically wrapped around teacher candidates' inquiry-based coursework so that inquiry work was openly shared, and a culture of inquiry more extensively developed throughout the PDS.

We learned from this approach that participants were able to inquire into unique questions of practice that also contributed to the PDS's learning by informing the practices and beliefs of members of the inquiry community (and beyond). The inquiry community described in this article encourages PDS partners to make inquiry the core of their work in order to be honestly curious, to question, to try new things, and to document their learning for the benefit of self and others. This article shares one design with promise for creating learning communities that are effective in spanning institutional boundaries and involving all community members. SUP

References

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. (2018). *A pivot toward clinical practice, its lexicon, and the renewal of educator preparation: A report of the AACTE Clinical Practice Commission.* https://aacte.org/resources/research-reports-and-briefs/clinical-practice-commission-report/

Badiali, B. (2019). Epilogue to the Summer 2019 SUP special issue: Remembering yesterday. *School-University Partnerships, 12*(3). https://napds.org/2019-sup-special-issue-published-goodlads-legacy-a-deliberation-of-simultaneous-renewal/

Badiali, B. (2020). Case 3—Rituals, celebrations, and traditions: Selected structural features that sustain a professional development school community. In E. Garin & R. W. Burns (Eds.), *Clinically based teacher education in action: Cases from professional development schools* (pp. 230-244). Information Age Publishing.

Brindley, R., Lessen, E., & Field, B. E. (2008). Toward a common understanding: Identifying the essentials of a professional development school. *Childhood Education, 85*(2), 71-74. https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2009.10523066

Burns, R. W., & Badiali, B. J. (2019). The transformative nature of boundary-spanning roles in developing teacher leaders: The case of a hybrid teacher educator in a professional development school context. *The New Educator, 16*(3), 187-206. https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2019.1684605

Burns, R. W., & Baker, W. (2016). The boundary-spanner in professional development schools: In search of common nomenclature. *School-University Partnerships, 9*(2), 28–39. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1130688.pdf

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge.* Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation.* Teachers College Press.

Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2020). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry* (4th ed.). Corwin.

Goodlad, J. I. (1994). *Teachers for our nation's schools.* Jossey-Bass.

Howell, P. B., Laman, T. T., Gnau, A., Bay-Williams, J., Brown, S., & Finch, J. (2021). Exploring teachers' perspectives across multiple partnership schools: One university's work to design mutually beneficial partnerships. *School-University Partnerships, 14*(1), 24-35. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1295774

Loughran, J. (2011). On becoming a teacher educator. Journal of Education for Teaching, 37(3), 279-291.

National Association for Professional Development Schools. (2021). *What it means to be a professional development school: The nine essentials* (2nd ed.). [Policy statement]. https://napds.org/nine-essentials/

Rutten, L. (2021). Toward a theory of action for practitioner inquiry as professional development in preservice teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 97,* 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103194

Rutten, L., & Badiali, B. (2020). Why they teach: Professional development school teacher candidates' initiating motivations to become teachers. *School-University Partnerships, 13*(1), 12-21. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1249340.pdf

Teitel, L. (1998). Professional development schools: A literature review. In M. Levine (Ed.)., *Designing standards that work for professional development schools* (pp. 33-80). National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.

United States Department of Education (2021). 2020 *Title II reports: National teacher preparation data.* https://title2.ed.gov/Public/Home.aspx

Wangemann, P. (2021). Call to renewal: Invention and reinvention in the Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership. *School-University Partnerships, 14*(1), 2-7. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1295767

Wolkenhauer, R., Cunningham, A., Yen, Y., & Rutten, L., with Essick, K., Feldman, S., Finley, D., Klock, H., McDonald, C., & Morgart, E. (2020, February). *Partners' investigations into a professional development school partnership: Collaborative inquiry during times of renewal.* Presentation at the conference of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), Atlantic City, NJ.

Wolkenhauer, R., & Hooser, A. (2021). Becoming clinically grounded teacher educators: Inquiry communities in clinical teacher preparation. *Journal of Teacher Education, 72*(2), 168–179. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022487120915865

Wolkenhauer, R., & Rutten, L. (2020) *Teacher educator learning in a professional development school.* AERA Annual Meeting San Francisco, CA http://tinyurl.com/vdxlh8sn

Wolkenhauer, R., Rutten, L., Klock, H., Essick, K., McDonald, C., Morgart, E., & Lynch, M. (2020). Shared decision-making in times of change: Facing challenges through collaborative inquiry in a PDS partnership. *PDS Partners: Bridging Research to Practice, 15*(2), 26-28.

Wolkenhauer, R., & Yen, Y., with Cunningham, A., Essick, K., Feldman, S., Finley, D., Klock, H., McDonald, C., Morgart, E., & Rutten, L. (2020, February). *Collaborative inquiry for teacher leadership: Partners' investigations into a professional development school partnership.* Invited roundtable at the conference of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), Atlantic City, NJ.

Yendol-Hoppey, D., Dana, N. F., & Hoppey, D. (Eds.). (2019). Preparing the next generation of teacher educators for clinical practice. Information Age Publishing.

Zeichner, K. M. (2005). Becoming a teacher educator: A personal perspective. Teaching and Teacher Education, 21(2), 117-124.

❖ ❖ ❖

Rachel Wolkenhauer https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4713-9723

Logan Rutten https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7508-2889

Azaria Cunningham https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5511-9557

Yun-chen Yen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9932-6224

Correspondence should be addressed to Rachel Wolkenhauer, Department of Curriculum & Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University, 178 Chambers Building, University Park, PA 16802, U.S.A. Email: rxw40@psu.edu

Rachel Wolkenhauer, Assistant Professor at The Pennsylvania State University, studies and teaches practitioner research as professional learning for pre- and in-service teachers and teacher educators in school-university partnerships.

Logan Rutten is a teacher educator at The Pennsylvania State University. His research interests include practitioner inquiry, teacher leadership, instructional supervision, and professional development within the context of school-university partnerships.

Azaria Cunningham, Ph.D. candidate at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research interest resides in examining pre-service teacher transitions into in-service professional positions in tandem with instructional environments, mentoring, and supervision practices (coaching).

Yun-chen Yen, Ph.D. candidate at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research interest includes practitioner inquiry and professional development in the context of transnational and school-university partnerships.