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PDS Partners

Are You a Real Teacher? A Teacher and Graduate Student Exchange in a PDS

*Becky Smith, University of Georgia
 Bashie Ebron, J.J. Harris Elementary School*

“You’re Not a Real Teacher”

Sitting with a small group of my (Becky Smith) fifth grade students, one of them shifted towards me and quietly asked, “Are you a real teacher?” I smiled, my gaze turning towards her voice; I had been waiting for this question, as I was co-teaching in a fifth grade classroom as part of an exchange program between the university and the local school district. “What makes someone a real teacher?” I questioned as I wondered how the children categorized my identity. “You have to be alone in the classroom,” one of them offered up, “to be a real teacher.” “Ms. Ebron’s hardly ever alone,” I countered as I listed the support staff working in our classroom. “You have to have your name on the door,” breathed another suggestion.

“My name is on the door,” I responded, as they rushed outside to see the sign explaining I was a Professional Development School District (PDSD) Fellow placed in the classroom. “Do you have a degree in teaching, or are you like our student teacher?” a child pointed towards our teacher candidate. “I have three degrees and I am working on my Ph.D.” The children were silent for a moment. Finally, one spoke up, “Okay, Ms. Ebron is the real-real teacher, you are a real teacher, and our student teacher is a pretend teacher.”

There are two voices represented in this space. One is of Becky Smith, PDSD Fellow, a second year doctoral student who as part of an assistantship exchanged places with Bashie Ebron, Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) a fifth grade teacher at an elementary school. This exchange

allowed Bashie to be released from classroom duties to supervise undergraduate students in the field twice a week. We are using this space as a way to reflect on our experience, explore the entanglement of our roles, and demonstrate our arrangement as a small part of the Professional Development School (PDS) partnership whose purpose is to integrate theory and practice to facilitate the growth and achievement of the elementary and pre-service students.

Partnership

Schools and university partnerships often rely on “multi-layered systems of distributed expertise” to find multiple avenues to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Childs, Edwards, & Mcnicholl, 2014, p. 30). Relying on an established five-year

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relationship, the PDS partners looked to expand the relationship. The school in question already had a professor in residence, faculty members who supported pedagogy and instruction, and community engagement. What was missing was the voice of the teachers in the university space to balance the partnership.

Working without grants or external funds, a possible solution was an exchange between a graduate student and a classroom teacher. The exchange would include a thirteen-hour workweek at the school for the graduate student, during which time the teacher would be released from classroom duties to supervise the field experience of teacher candidates and attend the accompanying methods course. This exchange would support the partnership's mission and vision of integrating professional development, renewing the school staff, and merging theory with practice.

Initial Response

Bashie

At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year my principal mentioned that our PDS partnership needed an upper elementary teacher to participate in an exchange with a doctoral student from the university. The idea resounded and continued to echo throughout the beginning of the year, intriguing and dynamic, an opportunity for me to be refreshed. I would have a voice in preparing future educators for the responsibility of educating children.

The culture of our classroom was tightly united within and suspicious of strangers. I knew if they would not accept another person in my stead, the exchange would not be a success. My 21 children (students receiving services through the English Language Learners Program, Special Education Program, and Early Intervention Program, and a few students with no services) were cautious and demanded adults that had their best interests in mind.

The first time I asked about the exchange, they declined to have another adult invited into our world, but they were curious about the doctoral student as an individual and her personality. After a period of waiting, I asked again and included an opportunity for her to come visit our classroom. They begrudgingly accepted. After the students were sure she would uphold the structure of the classroom, educate them, and love them, they accepted her as an exchange for me in the classroom.

Becky

During a summer meeting, I was sitting with my advisor in her office; she paused, looked at me with a twinkle in her eye, and asked how I would feel about going back into the classroom to support the multi-layered approach to our PDS. She loosely described her vision, but left the specifics

open-ended to be determined by the exchange. I reflected over the weekend about committing to this type of work. Being a teacher at heart, this opportunity would give me a chance to return to the familiarity of the classroom. However, the decision would prioritize my work in a clinical rather than a research setting for a temporary amount of time. After contemplation, I found I was ready to return to see how my teaching had been influenced by my doctoral work. The next step was to meet with the principal to discuss my role, my philosophy of teaching, and her expectations. This turned out to be the first of three gateway interviews with the school. The second step, meeting with the teachers, allowed them to ask questions about their time spent away from the classroom, the impact of my teaching on their students, and the professional development opportunity. The final interview was perhaps the most important. The process to find a teacher who took an interest in the exchange took an entire semester and just before the winter break, I was to meet the students to see if I passed their scrutiny. In retrospect, I found out they had voted not to have another teacher because they were worried about my personality, teaching style, and expectations. That morning, I arrived at school and entered the classroom. Instead of hanging back, I immediately jumped in to the classroom, working with each student individually, beginning to break down personal barriers. I spent the next few days in the classroom learning about them, understanding the daily structure, and observing the classroom.

Roles

This arrangement caused us to blur and expand the identities of a classroom teacher, graduate student, mentor, researcher, supervisor, and facilitator as we moved between different roles removing hierarchies between schools and university, often referred to as boundary spanning (Stevens, 1999; Fisher & Many, 2014; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). We found that our roles were not determined by the multitude of titles we held, but rather by our actions. Many times these were entangled and overlapping. To the classroom students we were teachers, the university students saw us as supervisors and mentors, the school's faculty considered us as colleagues and in university spaces we were potential researchers.

Bashie

My role in the multi-layered approach to educating and facilitating the growth of university students into viable teacher candidates was envisioned and defined by a professor, district personnel and my principal, but not limited in scope. The exchange

involved inserting me into the doctoral student's role and being a supervising "graduate assistant" for ten university students in their practicum at J.J. Harris Elementary. I was fulfilling the traditional role of a doctoral student supervising undergraduate students and a non-traditional role using the "clinical supervision model" (Shiveley & Poetter, 2002, p. 287). My applicable pedagogy was practice converging with theory, and my familiarity with our school's "curriculum, faculty and culture" could sustain and give voice to the elementary school's vision (Shiveley & Poetter, 2002, p. 287) within the partnership. Outside of the identified role assigned I had additional responsibilities to my undergraduate students to impart what it means to be an effective and enthusiastic educator within the boundaries of policy expectations. I would be vested in the teacher candidates' performance and influence on student learning and achievement due to my active status as a teacher and supervisor/facilitator. Simultaneously, I was still a classroom teacher ensuring the emotional well-being and academic achievement of my younger students.

Becky

In addition to participating in the exchange, Bashie collaborated with a university professor to develop culturally relevant curriculum focused on social justice. Because of my relationship with the classroom, I agreed to film the social justice unit on Thursdays. In my mind, I reasoned that on Thursdays, I was a researcher until I realized the entanglement of roles occurring during our time in

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the classroom. Bashie was commenting on her supervision of university students, asking me how I had previously scheduled observations. Our teacher candidate was concluding a social studies lesson; earlier in the week, she had asked me to evaluate her teaching. During this time, I was also trying to set up a video camera and lapel microphone to film our weekly social justice lesson. Meanwhile, an administrator was in the room getting ready to do a walk-through of the class and observe our co-teaching methods. Finally, during the transition, the students were imploring me to be in their group during the social justice lesson. In the space of five minutes, I had assumed the roles of teacher, graduate student, researcher, and mentor.

Roles and Responsibility

Bashie

How and when this real time exchange of roles occurred was left to my collaborative partner and me. We had to provide an operational bottom up response to a top down initiative. I



was a homeroom teacher to a group of academically diverse students, data team leader, and school improvement leadership team representative responsible for duties in each of these defined areas. Now I had chosen to add another responsibility. I wanted to share my knowledge, practice, and reflections with the teacher candidates, enculturating them into the elementary school's viable learning community and facilitating their growth into pre-service educators.

The exchange and overlap in roles forced me to become increasingly structured and protective of my time. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I was out of my homeroom class from 9:00 AM to 11:40 AM, observing or in an undergraduate class assisting with instruction. The rest of my day was spent within the classroom providing instruction to my elementary students, mentoring a student teacher, and facilitating conversations about student data and school improvement with my fifth grade team.

Initially the majority of undergraduate students were as resistant to me as my students were to the doctoral student. They stared blankly when I spoke, asking no questions with apparent disinterest on their faces. Time, exhibition of knowledge, and observation were my tools to break down those barriers, as the students observed me within the school and saw me communicate with students throughout the school. These observations led to student engagement and recognition of me as an immediate resource, an appreciation of my depth of knowledge, understanding of mutual professionalism and powerful pedagogical conversations. I could offer the undergraduate students authentic support immediately; I was located within the same building and could provide them with fresh and applicable examples. Having 11 years of teaching experience and two years of administrative experience, I could connect practice to theory and demonstrate the usefulness of the pedagogy imparted in college classrooms to their elementary classrooms. I could talk to them about the importance of building relationships with students. I could answer questions about the interactions and dynamics of my classroom because the teacher candidates saw me in the building interacting with my own students. I provided answers to multiple questions. How do you identify the problems with instruction that was ineffective in the classroom? How do you provide instruction to English Language Learners, while effectively managing a student who is learning, but disruptive? I provided direct feedback to improve their quality of teaching and enhance student achievement.

Becky

As I deconstruct my experience, I see that many of my responsibilities were overlapping. Untangled, I found myself responsible to three different institutions: the elementary school, the university, and the PDS partnership. In the classroom, our teacher candidate limited my involvement. Not wanting to infringe on her experiences, I served



Figure 1: Bashie Ebrum (left) TOSA & Classroom teacher Becky Smith (right) PDS Fellow & Graduate Student

as a support teacher for her and mentored her throughout the semester. Additionally, I participated in weekly data team meetings, monthly staff meetings and professional development workshops. It was important to the partnership, school staff, and students that I established a presence in the building, integrated myself in daily activities, and contributed to the working of the building. After an initial integration period, the students accepted me as a teacher, although I never achieved the status of a primary teacher. Bashie and I were mindful of which students came to her for help and which students preferred to work with me. We used this knowledge to place students in groups, offer emotional support, and work through behavior challenges.

As a graduate student, I agreed to help carry out research in our classroom by videotaping our social justice unit. During this time, I documented the process that Bashie used to plan and carry out lessons. I held focus groups with students to understand the impact of the unit and collected data including materials, transcripts, and lesson plans. Because of the partnership, this research opened up another opportunity for our classroom. The video was edited into a film for my video ethnography course. Our students were able to come to a film festival on campus and watch other graduate students and professors respond to their experience. Finally, my work in the classroom and university supported the PDS. At the end of the school year, Bashie and I presented our work to a variety of audiences including the school's PDS focus meetings, district-wide PDS council meetings and the teachers' Summer Institute workshop sessions.

Outcomes

As we reflected, we began to conceptualize the realities of the exchange and uncovered the benefits to both the elementary and university students. One of the main purposes of the partnership is the focus on students. Our interactions within the elementary classroom and within the clinical environment facilitated a collaborative learning environment for our elementary students and undergraduate students. It was an exchange of roles, responsibilities, and ideas to facilitate the growth of two separate groups of students.

The elementary students performed exceedingly well on the state and local assessments. We saw great gains in state tests, local benchmarks, and classroom assessment. Because of the collaboration model, small flexible grouping directly impacted the students' instructional needs for explicit instruction in Math, English Language Arts and Reading. At the end of each lesson, daily checks determined their understanding of curriculum standards. The following day they were grouped according to the academic, social, and emotional needs. The days we were both in the classroom, we were able to achieve a student/teacher ratio of four to five students to one adult.

The teacher candidates accepted critiques of their teaching performance and began their individual metamorphoses into pre-service educators as the semester progressed. They evolved in their use of classroom management, instructional strategies, and professionalism. The teacher candidates learned to be aware of their surroundings when they provided instruction, monitored student



teaching? Why did you choose these particular models? Describe how this experience enhanced your ability to collaboratively plan and co-teach a lesson for students with diverse learning needs, and what did you learn from this experience?

Reflective questions were also asked of the cooperating teachers. Questions included: *How do you think your role as a cooperating teacher impacted the delivery of instruction by these candidates? How did this interaction and delivery of instruction impact your students?* Additionally, questions were asked of the P-12 students who were the recipients of the co-teaching experience such as: *What did you like about the way the teacher candidates taught this lesson? What did you dislike? What did you learn?* The dyad taught two different lessons in this model with pre and post conferencing and observation for both of them.

The series of questions used in dialogue exercised participants' professional development. Cooperating teachers, university faculty and teacher candidates were all able to reflect upon practices and reciprocally learn from each other. This notion supported NAPDS Essential 4 as a commitment to innovative and reflective practices shared by all participants.

The candid feedback regarding the experience will allow the Co-PDS community to gain a better understanding of what will be needed to further expand the boundaries within the established PDS. This reflective practice will help explore the possibility of developing new relationships within this partnership and the other buildings within this district. Furthermore, this process of inquiry helps integrate learning between candidates and faculty to better address the needs of diverse learners with the ultimate goal of impacting the success and confidence of all children served in this district.

NAPDS Essential 8 is exemplified by higher education faculty and teacher education candidates working across institutional settings with district P-12 students, faculty, and administration to implement this Co-PDS model. Careful consideration of the collaborating community culture is addressed through both formal and informal roles, as well as consistent communications between higher education faculty and district representatives. Furthermore, the district and college missions interconnect, with a focus on collaboration for student success.

Following PDS guidelines and expectations for both formal and informal roles, establishment of responsibilities for higher education faculty and teacher education candidates, as well as P-12 PDS partners, is crucial. This project involved three higher education faculty (general and special education), two teacher education candidates (general and special education), and seven members of the District P-12 administration and faculty (superintendent,

partnership liaisons, school psychologist/coordinator of special programs, principal, and teaching staff), not including the P-12 learners and the parents/guardians. Planning involved contacting stakeholders through email, phone calls, written documents, and face-to-face encounters.

Collaboration and implementation of the Co-PDS involved numerous communications between the higher education faculty and the P-12 partners. The Special Education Field Placement Coordinator initiated the request for the pilot co-teaching experience after conferring with both special education and general education faculty. With permission granted, the university faculty met with the Principal to gain support for the pilot and to discuss the details of the co-teaching preparation, implementation, and observations on the part of higher education faculty, as well as cooperating teachers and teacher education candidates. Meanwhile, higher education faculty also met with the members of the proposed co-teaching dyad to determine interest in the pilot, communicate responsibilities and supports, and determine a timeline for implementation. Throughout development of the candidate co-teaching process, and full implementation and assessment, all stakeholders involved maintained communication consistently via both email and face-to-face meetings.

The Patton College of Education's mission and vision call for faculty and teacher education candidates to embrace the roles of leaders and advocates for marginalized populations in lower SES communities to promote the common good. Teacher-education candidates' experiences in these roles are paramount to the development of reflective, effective educators for twenty-first century learners. The Partnering District's mission is "to work together for excellence in student achievement." P-12 district and building collaboration with the college within the PDS framework furthers the emphasis on structured cooperation for P-12 learner success. Faculty and candidates learn through observing theory put into practice, an important bridging mechanism for effective instructional programming for future educators. Combining both party's missions, evidence-based practices can be infused into learners' academic, emotional, and social programming for higher student achievement, suggesting more successful futures for district students and the local community at large.

Pamela Beam is the Trimble Middle School Partnership Faculty Coordinator and Methods Faculty at Ohio University; she can be reached at beamp@ohio.edu. Karen Oswald is the Alexander Schools Special Education Partnership Coordinator and Special Education Faculty at Ohio University; she can be reached at oswald@ohio.edu. Perianne Bates is the Middle Childhood Partnership and Special Education Faculty at Ohio University; she can be reached at bates@ohio.edu. ●

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learning through questioning strategies, and built relationships with students to strengthen their management abilities in the classroom.

What was quickly determined through this experience was the tension between the vision and the implementation process. The ideas for this exchange came from the top of the partnership; however the actual daily challenges needed to be addressed quickly. Because our situation is so unusual, we could have benefited from more time to plan with a succinct and consistent planning time together, while still allowing for flexibility in schedules. Our communication about curriculum, instruction, and data needs to be consistent instead of communicating in a limited and sporadic manner. Individuals outside our partnership needed to recognize the complexity of our exchange, seeing us as the same individual for procedural classroom tasks, while understanding we are exchanging duties and adding to our individual responsibilities. We found that our partnership needed time and space from both school administration and faculty members from the university. We believe the arrangement provided a growth opportunity for both authors and the elementary and pre-service students within the PDS partnership.

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- Becky Smith is a Doctoral Student at the University of Georgia; she can be reached at Beckys13@uga.edu. Bashie Ebron is an Elementary Teacher at J.J. Harris Elementary School; she can be reached at ebronb@clarke.k12.ga.us. ●*