

Chapter 16

Hard to Believe It All Started on a Napkin!

Anatomy of a Long-Term School– University Partnership to Create and Evaluate Effective Practice

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to investigate and identify effective instructional practices for students with moderate-to-severe intellectual disability, university researchers partnered with a local, public school system. This new knowledge generated by this partnership has impacted thousands of teachers and students locally, nationally, and internationally. This chapter provides a historical description of the partnership from both the public school and university perspectives over the past 13 years. Specifically, this chapter describes why the partnership was formed, what it took to get it started, how it was organized and reorganized over time, the actions needed to sustain it, and the impact upon the individuals who participated in the partnership. The authors present both the benefits and challenges of the partnership in hopes that such a rich description will encourage and inform others to replicate this partnership. The chapter ends with suggestions for future directions for the partnership and research on school-university partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

A common form of collaboration between K-12 schools and university teacher education programs is the Professional Development Schools (PDS) model. PDS collaboration between individual

schools or school districts and universities typically attempt to blend theory and practice with common goals to improve professional practice and student learning (Teitel, 2003). The school provides clinical placements for teacher candidates in order for the candidates to develop their teaching skills under the

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guidance of practicing educators. The university provides a pool of teacher candidates with content and pedagogical knowledge and clinical supervision by faculty. Research on PDS activities is predominately non-experimental using qualitative methods (e.g., Anderson & Standerford, 2012; Bier, Horn, Campbell, Kelley-Peterson, Stevens, Saxema, & Peck, 2012; Davies, 2012; Fisher & Rogan, 2012), survey methods (e.g. Damore & Kapustka, 2011) or a mix of the two (e.g., Martinovic, Wiebe, Ratkovic, Willard-Hot, Spencer, & Cantalini-Williams, 2012; Clary, Styslinger, & Oglan, 2012) in order to describe PDS practices, and evaluate effectiveness and preparedness of teacher candidates involved in PDS experiences.

This chapter describes a non-PDS, research-focused, long-term relationship (13 years so far!) between special education and research faculty in the College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (heretofore referred to as the university) and the administrators, teachers, students, and parents of a large, urban, public school district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (heretofore referred to as the school system) as illustrated in Box 1. The university enrolls over 3000 undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates in 9 undergraduate, 17 Master's, and four doctorate degree programs and 14 graduate certificate programs. The school system is a large, urban school system with approximately 144,000 students in 159 schools in pre-kindergarten thru

grade 12 of whom 54% are economically disadvantaged. There are currently 13,924 students with disabilities (9.7% of the student population). In this chapter we describe how and why this relationship developed, how it morphed over time into a sustainable practice, and the benefits and challenges from the different university and public school views. We hope this description can be the impetus for future collaborations between universities and public schools with a common goal to improve teacher practice and student learning. Our specific goal was to improve practices for students with moderate-to-severe intellectual disability (heretofore referred to as severe disability) and their teachers.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Why the Partnership Initially Formed

Students with disabilities have only had the federally mandated right to a free public education since 1975 through PL 94-142 (known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Before that time, many students with severe disability stayed home or were served by charities. The first services for students with severe disability in the school system were provided through a public separate "center." Later a public,

Box 1. Vignette of research activities to create and evaluate effective practice

Diedre is a 4th grader with autism and intellectual disability who has difficulty expressing herself verbally. Diedre and several classmates are using iPads to voice their answers to phonics instruction provided by their teacher. Her teacher, Ms. McGee, is using a curriculum guide and materials prepared by university researchers. A Graduate Research Assistant (GRA), a doctoral student at the local university, is off to the side of the table with the teacher and students, video recording the lesson and completing an instructional fidelity form for the lesson.

After the lesson is over, it is time for lunch. Once the students have left the room with the teaching assistants, Ms. McGee meets with the GRA to review her fidelity and talk about the new curriculum. She missed a couple of items and tells the GRA that she skipped them on purpose because some students had more trouble with them. The GRA provides some suggestions on how to differentiate her instruction of these items for these students.

Later that week, the GRA is at a meeting with her fellow GRAs and several faculty members. The group is reviewing progress of the individual students in the research study. The faculty members are working together on a research grant to develop phonics instruction on the iPad. The GRA relates Ms. McGee's concerns about the items she skipped. The group discusses the issue and makes a slight revision in the curriculum to include a description of the differentiation that may be needed on these items for other students.

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