

From Obstacles to Opportunities in a Professional Development School Partnership

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Abstract

Institutions create partnerships that are grounded within the needs of each community and school culture to further their goals. Collaboration among professionals in several fields allows for an expanded view of diversity of people, institutions and opportunities, which benefits all parties. Collaborators can see differences and possibilities in the context of cultural, ethnic and institutional expectations, attitudes and routines, thinking patterns, and administrative procedures as opportunities for learning. Partnerships are challenging due to the many potential barriers. Willingness to view these possible barriers from the point of view of possibilities can change the nature of this list to become opportunities.

Introduction

Why bother with complicated partnerships and collaboration? Why be concerned with bringing people together who are accustomed to functioning in institutional silos, sequestered in their own disciplines and buildings? Why bother when the nature of organizing and setting collaborative projects up is multifarious and wieldy? The answer lies in part in the reality that future and practicing teachers must be able to work successfully with children, communities, parents, and colleagues to support the learning of all students (DeBlois, 2000, Nichols-Solomon, 2000). The same is true for other professionals—nurses, administrators, and counselors working in educational communities alongside teaching staff. All of these professionals have scrutinized the crucial factors in a school-university partnership collaboration, which is based on a model integrating the knowledge and practices of various human services disciplines, through a Comprehensive Integrated Services Model (Wolffe, Jackson, Sattler & Robinson, 2003).

The complexity of demands placed on professionals in educational settings is creating a greater need for us to understand each others' practice arenas to better serve the public, the needs of learners and the staff. People vary greatly in their capacity to welcome and exhibit collaborative attitudes and intentions. Successful partnership experiences in the past give courage to individuals to venture into the volatile territory of partnering. Adjusting to environments that reflect a different population base than what candidates, colleagues and learners are accustomed to, calls for innovative approaches to gaining experiences with diverse populations. Dwindling resources are forcing people to work together more effectively in increasingly diverse settings and communities that are economically challenged. These are all important reasons for needing to better understand the process of collaboration. There is a need to focus on utilizing the strengths of institutions, faculty and staff members, to generate greater energy and impetus in the work of supporting student learning and the ongoing growth and development of other professionals.

Possibilities in expanding collaborative action in partnerships

Pre-service and practicing human services professionals (teachers, nurses, counselors, administrators, physical therapists, nutritionists, family and consumer scientists) often perceive a gap between theory and practice. It is for this reason that collaboration and integrating knowledge in the world of practice becomes all the more important between those preparing professionals at the university level and those already working in schools. Through collaborative endeavors, the intertwining nature of theory and practice can be viewed and analyzed in reflective dialoguing among the diverse members of a professional development school partnership. Collaboration allows learners to reframe their perception of profession based on their prior experiences. That which initially is seen as a deterrent to collaboration in diverse settings, can become a strength and an opportunity through possibility thinking and empowerment orientation (Robinson & Siitonen, 2004). Prior assumptions are questioned or dissolved, new possibilities emerge and a deeper level of dialoguing with others ensues. (Robinson & Graham, 2003, Robinson, Wolffe, Hunt & Hoerr, 2002).

However, there are many roadblocks to effective partnership collaboration. Lozanov's (1978) suggestions of barriers to learning serve well in scrutinizing collaborative challenges, especially as it pertains to tolerance and understanding of diversity. An intuitive-affective barrier projects everything, which fails to create confidence and a feeling of security, something that works into the trust issue of partnerships. The critical-logical barrier (philosophizing, explaining away), and the ethical barrier (suggestions contradictory to the ethical principles of the individual are not realized), can also become roadblocks in creating collaborative relationships. In educational communities with diverse populations, biological-medical barriers (nutrition, biochemistry and disabilities), cultural-social factors (peers, gender, ethnic and learning styles) as well as institutional-physical factors (barriers of access, discrimination, financial restrictions) (Jensen, 1995) can become deterrents to effective collaboration. Willingness to view these potential barriers from the point of view of possibilities can change the nature of this list to one of opportunities instead of obstacles.

Professional development and a non-threatening, trust evoking environment, as well as continuous reflection on practices are essential to continuous growth promoting collaboration. In order to change barriers into opportunities, the partnership needs to reflect factors found important in professionalism:

1. Professional commitment to enhance growth and learning,
2. Professional autonomy,
3. A dynamic concept of learning and
4. Collaboration and interaction in the school community and society, including research (Niemi & Kohonen, 1995).

Collaboration invites other thinkers' perspectives. Once trust connects the individuals in their daily routines, collaborative voices mingling together produce innovative ideas. Perspective shifting can strengthen the practitioners' views of classroom and life in a larger context of a diverse school community. Similarly, university faculty can become more grounded in practice and everyday challenges of classroom questions when engaging in collaborative dialoguing and continuous interaction with those in the classrooms. Collaboration supports activities and a reflective stance. Reflection supports both making connections, making informed and thoughtful decisions, and aids both teachers and students in becoming more aware of their own learning (Douillard, 2002, Kemmis, 1985). The continuity in the cycle of experiencing events, reflecting, conceptualizing learning, articulating what has been learned and experimenting results in "raised awareness about their intentions as teachers and of their personal values" (Kolb, 1984, Denicolo & Pope, 1990, 164).

The professional development school partnership discussed here is anchored in an Integrated Services model forming a complex set of relationships between a College of Education and Health Sciences (including departments of nursing, family and consumer sciences, educational leadership and human development, physical therapy, and teacher education) and three public urban schools; an early childhood school (birth through 1st grade), a performing arts magnet school (K-8), and an urban high school. For our partnership's tenth anniversary celebration those involved with directing and coordinating the project worked to capture visually how collaboration is working to enrich learning and experiences; both in various departments of the college and in the schools where there are professional development school relationships. Many of the partnership's qualities are reflected in what Saphier and King (1985 in Teitel, 2003) indicate as important characteristics of supportive school cultures: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, reaching out to knowledge bases, appreciation and recognition, caring, celebration and humor, shared decision making, protection of what is important, tradition and honest communication. This partnership by the virtue of its complexities allows several types of diversities to be present: ethnic, racial and economic diversity, diversity of experiences, cross-fertilization of thinking and perspectives through and with multiple disciplines, as well as the diversity of institutional cultures, policies and procedures. The following visual shows multiple channels through which the partnership has allowed understanding to grow and to demonstrates in a concrete manner how the partnership has led to positive results. The goals for the partnership: to support student learning, promote research and inquiry, to support professional development of faculty and staff and to prepare professionals in the human services professions, are being met through our collaborative work.

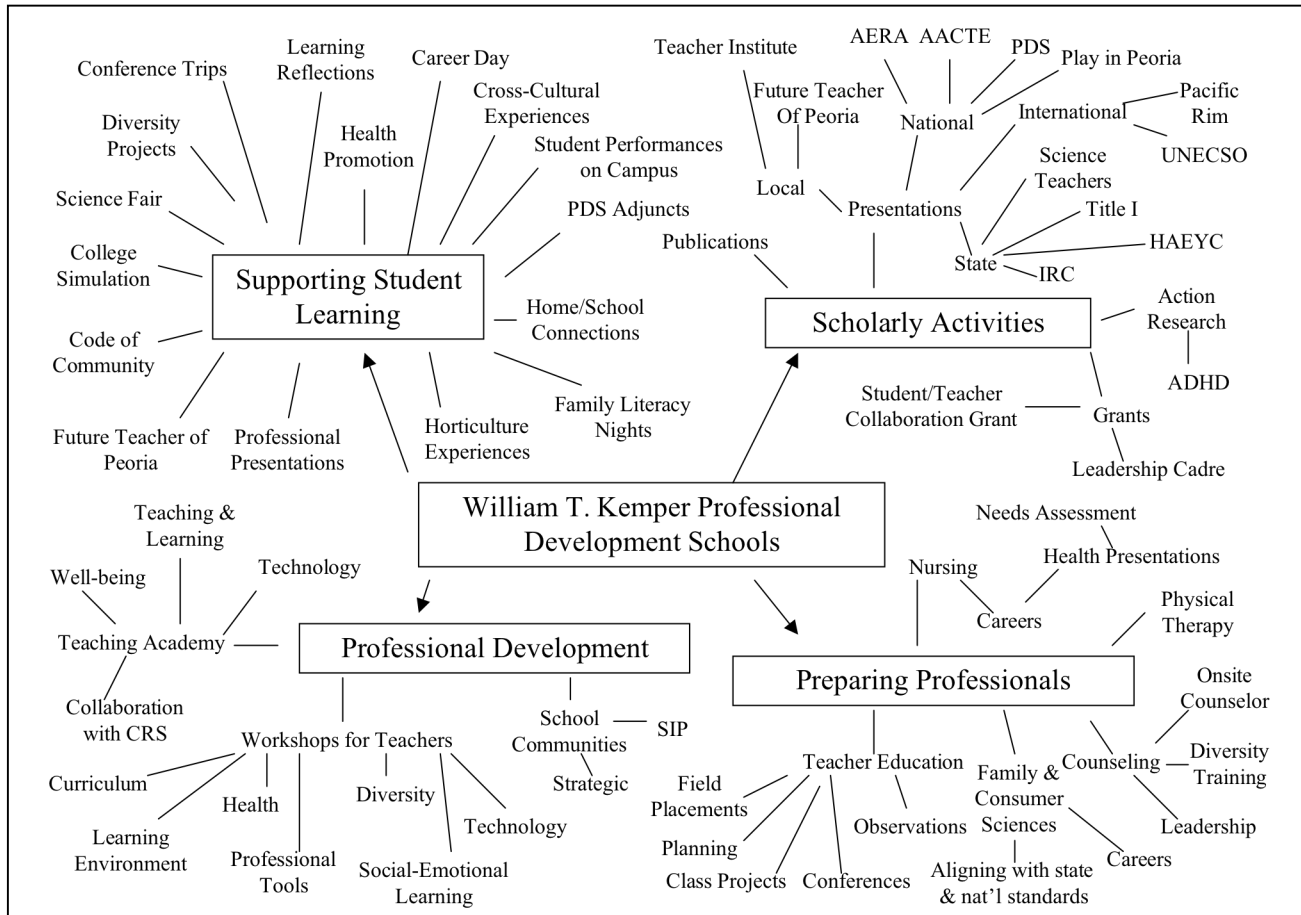


Figure 1. Professional Development School connections related to the partnership goals.

To show the complexity of reality, the visual captures the interconnectedness, messiness and real-life nature of the processes for people involved in the partnership. Any diagram that was less complex would not capture the full spectrum of interactions and realized possibilities of the partnership. To exemplify some of the possibilities that exist in partnership work, examples of the multilayered opportunities that have grown out of interactions and relationships between individuals, groups and institutions are provided. This professional development school partnership facilitates learning but also creates opportunities for unexpected learning and connections. The life of a partnership is evolving and dynamic and once the willingness to explore the possibilities exists, other things can follow.

An opportunity for cultural change

As a nationally recognized quality program in early childhood education, the early childhood education setting was the first partnership school. This year-around school, accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and frequently visited by educators from across the country, features multiage grouping, to focus on smooth transitions. The school serves 400 children and families birth through first grade, includes child-care for siblings so parents can volunteer their time in the classrooms. In fact, parent involvement is a requirement in this school. Parenting classes are organized to develop parenting skills. Parents develop a vision for children and their families and participate in family nights around different topics (reading night, health and heritage nights, local and national black history etc.). Deeply embedded into the culture of the school is a consistent time devoted to professional development. This serves as a beneficial experience for both novice teachers (junior-level pre-service teachers) and student teachers who learn professionalism at a very demanding level from the get-go.

This environment is perceived as being friendly, challenging and exciting. However being a nationally recognized setting, and therefore a center of attention of groups visiting the city, brings an element of stress to the school setting for the staff members. The relationship with the health professionals from the university allowed a discussion to begin about the wellbeing of professionals in the building. Almost in passing at a meeting with the partners, a faculty member mentioned that her university students had been doing health fairs in area schools. Suddenly, the

idea of wellness as an important part of professionalism emerged. There were discussions of how stress in the building could affect children as well adults. This discussion opened the eyes of all involved. Even though the holistic attention for the whole child is in the center of the curriculum, even though there is a health center in the school building, even though the family involvement is an integral part of this school's success, realizing how important the wellbeing and public recognition of wellness was a crucial collective discovery. The focus of this discovery became an integral part of the school's routine. Nursing students organized informational health stations around the school, walking tracks as well as measurements of blood pressure in school. Professional development included sessions about self-care, healthy nutrition, dealing with stress and discussing the school's emotional climate. A relatively simple but powerful shift in routines aided building relationships. A soup luncheon was instituted with the focus on time given for teachers to talk about important issues, not just in teams but cross teams as well. Taking time to eat together created shared experiences that recognized the contributions of each individual. Increased levels of wellness were reported due to chances of being able to talk to adults and colleagues. Some teachers got a yoga class started after school hours. The staff developed a school wide plan positive behavior *Together we can!* Groups of teachers started meeting together with their university professional development school coordinator to discuss other more sensitive issues such as dismantling racism and increasing tolerance and acceptance. Wellbeing for professionals became a theme for the university's teaching academy for a year and a half. This cultural change was learning to appreciate the value of articulating and valuing personal well-being as a way to support professional interactions and one's ability to focus fully on one's job.

An opportunity to explore the future

Just as the wellness activities are forward thinking, at the urban high school, college simulation is an activity that allows high school students to experience aspects of what it is like to be a college student, as well as for college students across different disciplines to revisit their own growth since leaving high school. The college simulation is an idea first envisioned by the partnership high school principal and has been experimented with and revised in different formats based on dialogue between the partners. It includes public school personnel; teachers working as study group leaders, as well as the students reading texts, participating in lectures/classes of a university professor. A university professor assigns readings and teaches classes interspersed with study groups led by the high school teachers or university students and/or faculty. Students take a test based on their weeklong experience with a presently taught college course (ranging from Western Civilization to English to Schools and Schooling in American Society – all typical general education requirements) and get feedback from the professor together with their test results. In the culminating shadowing experiences the high school students take a trip to the university campus, following students for a day on the campus. Students are partnered with a student in the field of their interest (if they already know what their interests are) and each group of learners is asked to reflect on their experiences both before and after the experience.

The culminating experience--shadowing a college student--- includes high school students going to college classes, eating together, visiting the dorm, and spending the day the way the university student typically would. The day spent with the college student spurs discussion about academics, different types of teachers and teaching, homework, projects, juggling responsibilities and the like but also many social, economic and other concerns dealing with going to college. Most high school students have had a chance to do this twice, both in their junior and senior years in different topics. The following figure shows how this one experience addresses each of the partnership goals as well as how each round of simulation leads to further improvements.

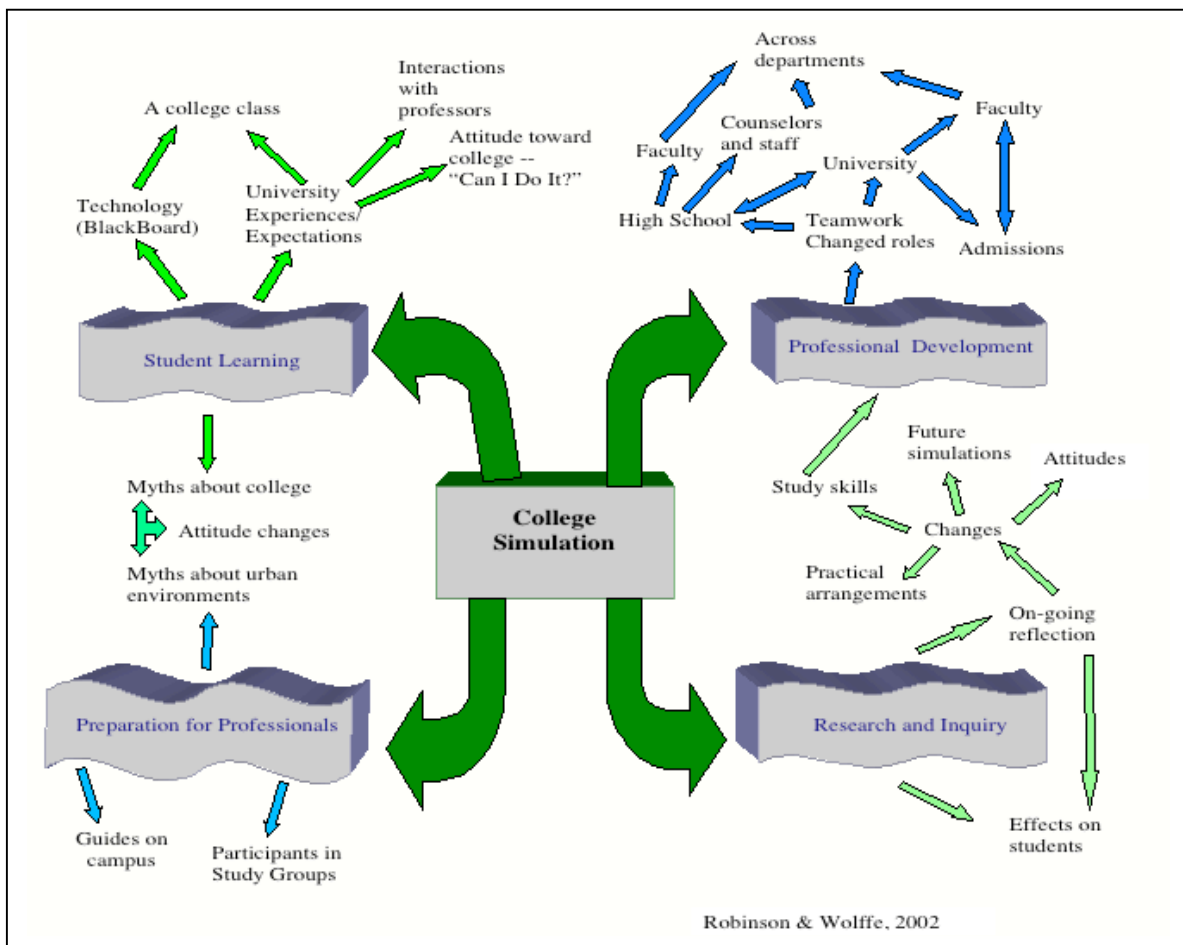


Figure 2. Partnership as a framework for learning through the College simulation experience

The interaction with college students and faculty during the college simulation experience allows for high school students to discover their own potential, to see the importance of continued learning and go to college in the future--something that many of them initially did not believe they would or could do. The following samples verify some aspects of this learning;

My favorite part of the college simulation was getting to come to the university to shadow a student. I thought it was really great that I was able to shadow someone who was learning to be what I want to be (High school student about college simulation).

The college simulation experience was very realistic. It gave me somewhat of an idea of what to expect and what not to expect. (High School student about college simulation)

To gain appreciation of the school environment and reflecting a better understanding of the reality of an urban school, and the professional demands of her profession, as well as the need to expand on her prior experiences, a university student remarked:

The school was a shock to me. Tim didn't seem to be what I though was "special ed" but just a normal teen.. I have never heard of societal causes for special education. The statistics on free lunch, pregnancy, and graduation rate stunned me. I don't think I came from a really high-class school, but hearing those statistics, was unfathomable. When I got back to my apartment, I called my mom & thanked her for reading to me. (University student)

The experience of doing study groups, interacting with university faculty, several professional development school faculty have taken the step to become adjunct teachers at the university and taught courses in the teacher education program.

An opportunity to enhance student learning

Another school, an elementary K-8 school with a focus on performing arts, had identified through its school improvement process the need to increase student performance in science. Meetings were held and through the hours of discussion various ways to enhance students' opportunities to learn science were identified. Consistent with the school's emphasis on performance and presentation, it was decided that one method that should be tried was a school-wide science fair. The plan was to be certain that all students participated and that the projects were truly developed by the students. The end result has been a superb event that promotes interest in science, provides student exposure to more science, and develops students' understanding of inquiry. However, the science fair could have easily been rejected as a component of the school improvement plan and student performance in science may not have improved as much as it has.

In the course of considering starting a science fair obstacles were recognized: time constraints in the school schedule and in the busy schedules of today' children, variable levels of support available from some homes, resource issues for materials to complete projects both in school and for families, and working out all of the logistics of set-up, judges, awards and so on. Clearly there were a fair number of reasons that could have been used to let critical-logical, cultural-social and institutional-physical barriers justify a conclusion that this proposed experiment to improve students' chances to engage science should not be implemented. Part of the reason that that did not happen was because the professional development school partnership provided the opportunity to see ways to overcome, or at least diminish, the degree to which the barriers would become obstacles. It also helped that prior partnership experiences had demonstrated the power the collaboration between the university and the urban performing arts magnet school provided when challenges needed to be met. So what happened?

The professional development school coordinator at the magnet school happened to be a science educator. She was able to address the issue of how to help so many children develop their projects. The decision had already been made that the work would be done at school. The coordinator was able to bring her university students who were learning how to teach science to the school where they supported the young children's work. This not only provided the elementary students the help they needed but it also provided the University students a wonderful chance to work with science teaching with real children and to gain further experiences working with students from diverse backgrounds. The professional development school coordinator was also able to use her connections on campus to provide the judges needed so that all of the children had a chance to present their projects to the community and receive input on their work.

The partnership has also been able to address the issue of materials needed by the students to make their projects. The University is promoting through internal grants for faculty and student collaborations in scholarship or service projects. These grants provided some of the funds needed to move the science fair project forward. Working with a different student each of the last two years, the coordinator and a pre-service teacher have developed project with a focus on supporting the science fair. This not only allowed for improvements in the process of having the university students help the K-8 students, but it also made available money to buy many of the little things from lemons to wire to poster board that the students needed for their science fair projects. Indicators of success include the fact that many of the science methods students spent far more hours working at the school than was required, the observation that the quality of the final projects has improved each year and that the fact that the children and parents are excited by the work being done as evidenced by the large turnout after school at the event. Add to this list other unexpected outcomes which might not have happened if the support needed to move the original idea had not been felt by all involved when the original decision was made to try a science fair. For example, two faculty members from the magnet school and the site coordinator from the University were able to analyze their work together on the science fair and presented their findings at a national conference. Also, one of these teachers has begun his work toward a doctorate in science education and one of the university students who participated in the faculty/student collaboration projects graduated and was hired to teach science at the school.

There is an old truism that for every question we answer by learning something new we come to know two more questions we would like to answer. Through the science fair project the partners have also established that for every possibility we are bold enough to explore we discover at least two more possibilities worth exploring. In this instance the partnership played a significant role in the process of recognizing that barriers need not be obstacles and that through collaboration making a difference in the lives of students is easier to accomplish.

Conclusions

Collaboration in partnerships can be multi-layered and multifaceted, but collaboration always is about individual engagement. Some of the partnership benefits are intangible; learning by immersion in the environment and culture of the partnership, comfort and trust felt in the presence of others, desire to stretch beyond the obvious, aspects that are impossible to mandate but obvious to those involved. A partnership newsletter describes this well:

It takes all of us and our unique perspectives to work together in this community for the future of our students. Our work in PDS is about increasing quality of life for everyone in our learning communities. PDS work is about an unusual privilege into a peak in each others' lives and the developing cultures of the partner institutions. Discovering and extending our strengths and capabilities is something that the partnership propels us to do, while creating something unique, which often amazes us as participants with energy and verve.

Picture this: Students on the stairs, singing "May you always have a song"-- a reminder for us that we are the models of dreaming, possibility, spunk and spirit for our children. Each one of us does make a difference with the gift of our personality, thoughts, and intentions. (Robinson, 2002 *Kemper Newsletter*)

Leading within the partnership starts within each professional's intentions to become a collaborator transcending potential barriers created by diverse community cultures into possibilities. The focus of developing partnerships which build multicultural collaborations between diverse disciplines and professions within diverse communities is to address the complexity of today's educational needs and environments. When trust is being developed intentionally, risk-taking and possibility thinking can dislodge barrier-based thinking. While focusing on our goals of preparing professionals in education and health, providing professional development, promoting research and inquiry, all of the partners are doing the most important thing: supporting students' learning. But even more than that: becoming those learning students ourselves.

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