

## **Introduction to the Themed Issue: Teaching in Times of Uncertainty**

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**Abstract:** This article is the introduction that provides context for the themed issue of *School-University Partnerships* entitled Teaching in Times of Uncertainty

### **NAPDS Nine Essential Addressed:**

- Essential 2: Clinical Preparation – A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.
- Essential 3: Professional Learning and Leading – A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.
- Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation – A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.
- Essential 6: Articulation Agreements – A PDS requires intentionally evolving written articulated agreement(s) that delineate the commitments, expectations, roles, and responsibilities of all involved.
- Essential 7: Shared Governance Structures – A PDS is built upon shared, sustainable governance structures that promote collaboration, foster reflection, and honor and value all participants' voices.
- Essential 8: Boundary-Spanning Roles – A PDS creates space for, advocates for, and supports college/university and P-12 faculty to operate in well-defined, boundary-spanning roles that transcend institutional settings.

Despite the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, Professional Development Schools (PDS) illuminate the power of preparing teachers through intentional partnerships that focus on clinical practice that is grounded in reflection, open to innovation, and committed to sharing the results of research and practice (NAPDS, 2021). With the Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021) providing a strong foundation for this special issue, *Teaching in Times of Uncertainty* presents nine articles focused on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as research that informs PDS work as we continue to move through the pandemic and beyond.

Since the March 2020 shutdown, teacher preparation programs and their PK-12 school partners have encountered unprecedented challenges. From state-mandated lockdowns that necessitated solely virtual learning to hybrid and in-person learning, the only constant for schools has been the changing nature of day-to-day school experiences. Uncertainty remains a constant state, and PK-12 schools and their university partners are expected to adjust instructional delivery plans with little to no warning. Adding to these challenges are substitute teacher shortages (Patterson, 2021), transportation issues (Lieberman, 2021), significant barriers to broadband services (Showalter et al., 2019), and ongoing conflicts related to masking and vaccination policies (Blad, 2021; Turner, 2021). The toll that the pandemic has taken on the physical and mental health of PK-12 children, college students, and educators is also now becoming apparent (Hartman, 2021; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Talevi et al., 2020). The unpredictability of these ongoing challenges makes effectively preparing teacher candidates a daunting task.

At our institution, Ohio University, located in rural southeastern Ohio, the effects of the pandemic are at times overwhelming. We enroll approximately 1500 undergraduate teacher candidates and 200 graduate teacher candidates per year in programs that include licensure from preschool through high school and in Special Education and Reading Education. Being located in a rural setting makes arranging clinical experiences for this many teacher candidates an arduous task, one that is made possible only by embracing a Professional Development School model. When the pandemic began, some of our PDS schools switched to solely online teaching platforms, while others delivered instructional supplies via buses and through school pick-ups. With PDS partnerships in place, our teacher candidates' clinical experiences continued. In the fall of 2020, our institution decided to require that all early field experiences (any clinical experience prior to the professional internship) remain virtual, no matter the modality of the school partner. Consequently, during the 2020-21 academic year, only professional internships were conducted in person. Thanks to ongoing PDS partnerships, early field experiences were able to continue virtually. Research with mentor teachers revealed that it was only due to our established PDS partnerships that they agreed to continue hosting teacher candidates virtually once their classrooms were back in person (Hartman, 2021). In the 2021-22 academic year, teacher candidates at all levels were excited to return to in-person clinical experiences. However, with the Omicron variant sweeping the globe, PK-12 schools and their university partners are once again plunged into a heightened time of uncertainty, making the research implications and the innovative practices presented in this special issue incredibly timely. With the pandemic far from over, an understanding of practices that worked and the long-term effects on teacher preparation are of the utmost importance for the schools and universities who continue to work together to prepare the next generation of educators.

Most importantly, the broader focus of *Teaching in Times of Uncertainty*, while rooted in recent events, underscores the importance of adapting to the world as it changes, no matter the specific event. While how we teach and the ways in which individuals within the PDS interact

may change over time, relationships between members of the PDS must be established and maintained. Therefore, it is important that we, as educators, share what we have done during times of uncertainty in order to maintain relationships, take care of one another, learn, and continue to positively impact all students' learning. The nine articles described next highlight the innovation and resilience found in PDS partnerships, as well as the long-term challenges that we must be ready to encounter as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Introduction to the Articles**

The articles within the *Teaching in Times of Uncertainty* special issue revolve around several themes that span the educational trajectory of a teacher candidate: support for newly entering teacher candidates; the essential role of mentoring; innovation within the PDS; and thinking ahead to their future teaching experiences.

### **Support for Newly Entering Candidates**

The first article in this special issue features the work of three schools in the Mason Elementary PDS partnership pathway. Authors Brown et al. describe how PDS schools supported the teacher candidates who entered the partnership during the pandemic. When the schools transitioned to online learning, continuing to support student learning while also being mindful of teacher candidates' development were key concerns for the partnerships. Importantly, the schools were sites of well-developed and carefully sustained PDS partnerships, which allowed challenges to be quickly identified and strategies for minimizing the impact of lost in-person classroom time to be implemented quickly. Through quality video resources and through observations of virtual teaching, high quality field experiences were maintained.

### **The Essential Role of Mentoring**

In the next four articles in this special issue, the essential role of mentoring was examined. Mentoring is an essential component of PDS partnership work, one that forms the foundation of strong clinical practice in teacher preparation (NAPDS, 2021). In the second article of the special issue, authors Shivers et al. used phenomenology to examine the mentor-mentee relationship between three pairs of mentor teachers and their teacher candidates. The study revealed that the mentor teacher-teacher candidate relationship was impacted in several ways, relating to the emotional impact, changing communication modalities, developing bi-directional support systems, and the need for ongoing support for navigating online learning.

Continuing an examination of mentoring, in the third article, authors Helmsing et al. examined the ways that mentor teachers' practices changed as a result of the pandemic. Their findings revealed that mentor teachers' practices related to mentoring shifted as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, their conceptions and beliefs about mentoring shifted beyond what would be considered traditionally received notions of mentoring. Based on their findings, the authors call for a reconceptualization of how the practice of mentoring is represented within teacher education programs.

Supporting clinical teacher mentors within the virtual environment was the focus of the fourth article. Authors Henning et al. highlighted the use of case studies to teach mentoring concepts and discover strategies for mentoring in the virtual learning environments that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about. The work discussed in this article may be useful for others working to build clinical capacity through professional development opportunities and can be applied within both traditional and virtual learning environments.

In the fifth article, authors Marshall-Krauss et al. investigated effective mentoring practices during virtual schooling between their university, an Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and their partnering school district. By examining these practices, the authors found that mentoring virtually during the pandemic could be as or more effective than mentoring in a face to face environment, but there are considerations to be made for teacher candidates' development of specific teaching skills, the relationship between teacher candidates and mentor teachers, communication, use of technology, and overall PDS structure.

### **Innovation Within the PDS**

The next three articles in this special issue showcase the innovation that PDS work often leads to and the ability to capitalize on it during the pandemic. With the sudden shift to a virtual teaching and learning environment, teacher educators had to make innovative adjustments to their programming. In the sixth article, Virtue et al.'s work sought to answer the following questions: How do school and university partners adapt their work to meet the needs of students, teachers, teacher candidates, university faculty, and the community? What does partnership work in a context of change and adaptation mean to individual partners? From their investigation into changes made to their community-embedded summer programming, three themes emerged: inspiration, interconnections, and innovation. By grounding their partnership work in strong theoretical and conceptual commitments to community funds of knowledge, social constructivism, the Nine Essentials framework for PDS partnerships, and social justice, the authors and their PDS partners were able to persist through the challenges faced during the pandemic.

In the seventh article, Johnson, Cortino et al. shared how they used the shift to virtual teaching and learning as an opportunity to provide a unique summer experience for their non-traditional teacher education students and the P-12 students they serve within their partnership. The redesign and implementation of their program was able to successfully meet the needs of a virtual and online teaching and learning environment. The authors reported stakeholders – boundary spanners, teacher educators, and elementary and secondary students – all benefitted from this unique experience and that engaging in this virtual learning experience afforded students opportunities they may not otherwise have had.

With the change to a virtual context for the field-based experiences courses, Johnson, Squires et al. recognized that improved field-based instructional content was needed. In the eighth article of this special issue, the authors described a collaboration between faculty and field-based educators that created scenario-based simulation modules for field experiences. The goal was to assist teacher candidates in preparing for deeper, practical engagement within a remote learning experience. The findings are relevant for other educator preparation programs who seek to improve the quality of virtual field experiences through collaborative PDS structures.

### **Thinking Ahead**

As we continue to see the COVID-19 pandemic disrupt teaching and learning, we must consider what we can come to expect to be the pandemic's continued impact. Implications suggest that we will need to continue to offer support to teacher candidates and new teachers in the years to come. To that end, the ninth and final article focuses on the story of first year teachers. Daoud et al. shared the story of two teachers whose professional internship was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact not completing this experience had on

them during their first year of teaching in their own classrooms. Through this work, they asserted the need for continued mentorship to support novice teachers. The findings revealed that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be felt for years to come. With this knowledge, educator preparation programs must give serious consideration to how novice teachers are being supported once they complete their program, and school districts must re-evaluate the adequacy of supports, resources, and mentorship they provide.

### **Final Thoughts**

If there is one connection that the articles in *Teaching in Times of Uncertainty* reveal, it is that the PDS model has been essential in supporting quality clinical experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the unprecedented situations created by the pandemic, PDS partnerships created structures that not only allowed clinical experiences to continue but also permitted innovations to thrive. From supporting teacher candidates who were new to field experiences, to improving mentoring relationships, to creating a space for innovative practices, this special issue highlights the power of the PDS model. As we look to the future, we hope that educator preparation programs and their PK-12 partners will find value in the research and practices presented in *Teaching in Times of Uncertainty*.

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