Listening to the Voices in Professional Development Schools: Steering Committee as Promoting Partnership

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Abstract: The article discusses the role and importance of the steering committee in professional development schools in advancing the partnership between the teacher education college and schools. Content analysis of the minutes of steering committee meetings held over a period of 10 years was carried out. The findings reveal the potential of the steering committee as a framework for building a relationship of trust among the partners and promoting discourse about different needs. The findings indicate changes that took place in the content discussed - from focusing on procedures to focusing on the needs of the partners and from ad hoc problem solving to a long-term design and from passivity to activity of the schools' representatives. Over the years, the steering committee became very significant in leading the policy in the professional development schools.

Introduction

A steering committee is an organizational structure set up in professional development schools (PDS) to strengthen the partnership between an institution of education and schools. This study aimed to examine the function, uniqueness and contribution of a steering committee in professional development schools over time. Understanding the processes undergone by the steering committee can help empower the partnership between schools and institutions of education

According to the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) in the US (2008), some of the essentials of a professional development school, such as: '1. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection and collaboration; 2. An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved' are consistent with the establishment and functioning of a steering committee in the PDS. A steering committee is an organizational structure set up in a PDS and is essential for outlining a policy that will advance and strengthen egalitarian partnership between teacher education institutions and schools (Teitel, 2003; Zilberstein, Beck, & Ariav, 2001; Allsopp et al., 2006). The steering committee should serve as a ruling body, and all participants are committed to advancing its decisions at the PDSs (Benedum Collaborative, 2004). The mission of the steering committee is to develop the PDS while maintaining optimal training for student teachers and professional development (PD) of all partners, including improvement of pupils' achievements.

In the research literature, we found that steering committees exist in PDSs. We found reports on their structure, and sometimes on their schedule and members (Teitel, 2003; Zilberstein et al., 2001). However, we did not find any studies that examined the essence and role of steering committees in the PDS over time. Allsop et al. (2006) point out that despite

the profound ways in which PDSs claim to change the school culture, few partnerships have presented any public description of their work. The partnership described in this research is between the secondary education department in a college of education and 13 high schools in Israel. In this college, all student teachers (K-12) are trained via the PDS model. We aimed to examine the contribution of a steering committee to the PDS. The present study examines the changes that took place in the discussions of a steering committee of the PDS over a span of ten years and the steering committee's role in promoting the PDS.

Theoretical Background

Steering committees in the education system usually exist in programs for creating a change, and especially in PDSs funded by the government and implemented under its auspices (Zellermeier & Margolin, 2005). Many of these committees have a similar composition, and include representatives from the academia, the schools and the community (according to the committee's goals). Another point of commonality is their function, which focuses more on the conceptual aspect of advising, developing and outlining policy, and less on the practical aspect of performance, supervision and control.

The steering committee in the PDS is presented as essential in outlining a policy that will advance and strengthen egalitarian partnership between the training institution and the schools. This committee is therefore positioned as one of the main structures of the PDS (NAPDS, 2008; Teitel, 2003; Zilberstein et al., 2001). The role of the steering committee in the PDS is to serve as a ruling body for all partners. It is managed democratically and all are equal partners in making decisions. The committee deals in dissemination of information and setting policy for the PDS. All participants are committed to upholding and advancing the decisions of the steering committee at the PDS sites (Benedum Collaborative, 2004).

In the most common structure of a steering committee in a PDS, members of the committee include school and teacher training institute liaisons, several members of the training institution, the school principal and an administrative representative. In some steering committees in PDSs there are more members from the training institution, parents and representatives from relevant external organizations.

Zilberstein et al. (2001) propose setting up two types of steering committees: (1) A separate steering committee for each school which discusses issues related to student teachers' training. Members of the school's steering committee include representatives of the training institution, school, division for teacher training of the government or district, school supervisor, representatives of the local authority and the community; (2) A joint steering committee, which consists of a network of schools and the training institution. Such a model exists at the University of West Virginia (2014), with a joint steering committee of the university and more than 40 PDSs. This committee has representatives from all PD sites (the schools and the university), such as university liaisons, school principals and heads of the steering committees of the PDS. The steering committee of the PDS of Washington College and the public post-primary schools in the district (2011) is also of this type. Committee members include college liaisons, school principals, school liaisons, a representative of the district and at least two staff members from each school.

There are two aspects in the activity of a steering committee (Zilberstein et al., 2001): The conceptual aspect that includes outlining policy, constructing the conceptual infrastructure and outlining the direction of the student teachers' training and the practical aspect of planning the training, guiding the performance and monitoring its development. The practical aspect also includes management of the partnership's resources, presenting possible resources such as time, budget and manpower (Teitel, 2003).

The PDS in the college described in this research was established in 2000. It was established before the publication of the standards for PDS in the US (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education - NCATE, 2001; Teitel, 2003), and a joint steering committee which consists of a network of schools and the training college was set up from the onset as one of the major structures whose goal is to strengthen the partnership and later advance all standards according to Teitel (2003). Ten meetings of the steering committee took place between 2000 and 2010. In some of the years, no regular meetings took place. In the last four years the steering committee met regularly once or twice a year. The steering committee is composed of stakeholders from the college and the schools: principals, liaisons, head of the secondary education department and head of the School of Education. This is the permanent team, which is also joined by experts according to the topics of the meetings, such as an expert in evaluation. The mission of the steering committee is to set a policy that will develop the PDS while maintaining optimal training for student teachers and PD of all partners, including improvement of pupil achievements.

Research Questions

Many PDSs have steering committees, but whether or how they contribute to the partnership was never questioned. This study examined the steering committee's role in developing the partnership and the specific areas in which it contributes to the PDS and whether it is necessary at all. The following research questions were investigated for this purpose:

(1) What is the role of the steering committee in promoting the partnership in a PDS?
(2) What are the major issues discussed by the steering committee regarding the mutual needs of the partners?
(3) What changes took place over the years in the steering committee in the perception of the partnership between the schools and the college?

Methodology

Method

The research is a qualitative research in which the content of ten minutes of meetings of the PDS' steering committee, held between 2001 and 2010, were analyzed. Qualitative studies are conducted in a natural setting and examine various phenomena through the prism of the subjects involved in the examined situation. The research is descriptive and draws its data from the natural system (Zabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1990).

Using this research method, the researcher himself is a central research tool that accumulates the data. The researchers read all of the minutes several times in order to obtain a general picture and to generate initial concepts from the data (Agar, 1980; Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Content analysis included arranging and structuring the information that was gathered in order to interpret it and understand its significance (Shkedi, 2004).

The category framework for the content analysis was designed out of the minutes (Ryan & Bernad, 2000).

Data Analysis

Content analysis of the minutes was carried out. In the first stage (the open coding stage), the minutes were read and reread until the researcher became familiar with the content and could generate initial concepts from the data (Dye et al., 2000). Content analysis was first performed independently by each researcher. Afterwards, analysis was performed jointly, until complete agreement on the categories was reached. Repeating themes were identified. The analysis method is the method of topics, where sections of text, and not single words or phrases, are used and the products of the analysis are topic categories. The minutes were analyzed according to the internal relational framework taken from the information that arose from them (emic). The research was not performed based on a finalized crystallized theory, but rather on a theory that was constructed as the research progressed, according to the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The second stage included axial and selective coding. The codes were grouped into similar concepts which yielded one category and three sub-categories: principles of operation, trust and commitment and professional development. The names of the categories and sub-categories were taken from the minutes (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). After the content analysis, ongoing comparisons of all documents and construction of general conclusions were performed (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Content analysis of the minutes regarding the partnership yielded one category: partnership's conceptual aspect and three sub-categories: principles of operation, trust and commitment and PD, as presented in figure 1.

Principles of operation are the first stage in constructing a PDS. Such a complex organizational system cannot be established without it. Trust and commitment are the second stage in constructing a PDS. After the conditions for building trust and commitment are created, PD can be carried out.
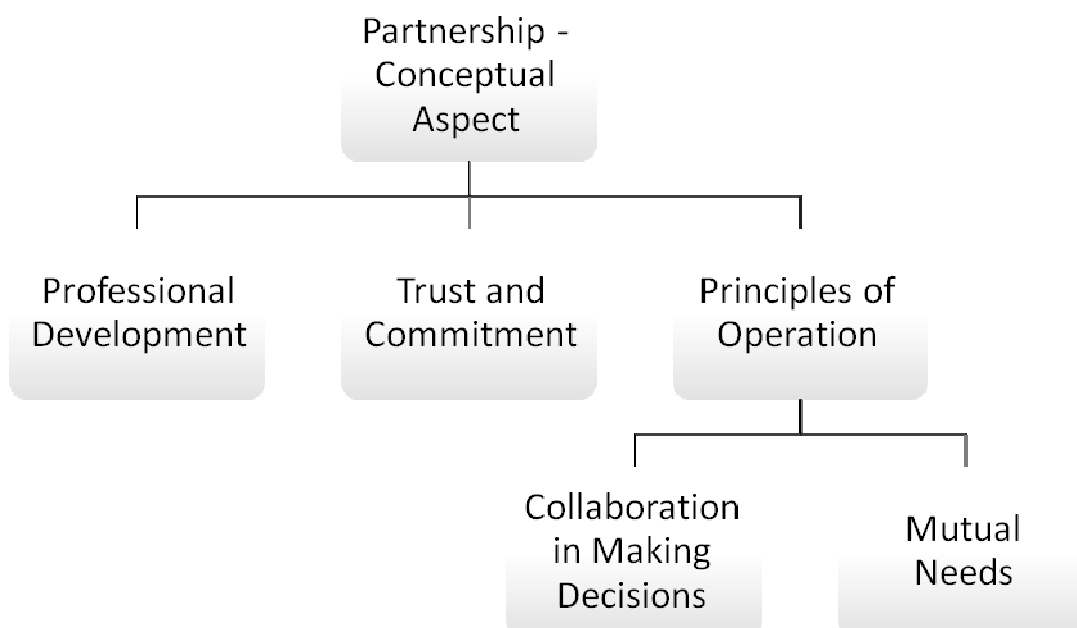

Figure 1: Category and sub-categories that express the partnership's conceptual aspect in the steering committee's discussions.

The conceptual aspect of the partnership consists of principles of operation, trust and commitment and PD that were developed. The findings will be analyzed according to the above sub-categories while looking at the changes that have taken place in each sub-category as time went by.

Principles of Operation

Two principles in the operation of the PDS evolved: answering mutual needs and collaboration in making decisions.

Mutual Needs

Due to the different nature of the partners, unique needs were raised in the first (1-4) steering committee meetings. In meeting 3 it was proposed that the committee should deal in realizing mutual needs: 'To examine the needs of the schools together, the capabilities of the college, to turn these into operative goals and recruit the parties to this issue.' One of the mentor teachers (classroom teacher with the additional responsibility of mentoring student teachers) said: 'I would like you, as an academic institution, to view your role not solely as training the student teachers, but rather as affording a service to the school teachers, affording them professional accompaniment in order to bring innovation to the teachers' PD' (meeting 1). The schools expressed needs in the didactic and disciplinary fields and asked whether the heads of the departments at the college were willing to change the curriculum with reference to the school curriculum and to what extent didactic adaptations are made for heterogeneous classes.

The needs of the college which were raised by the steering committee (meetings 1-2) were mainly organizational needs in 'recruiting' schools: recruiting mentor teachers, admitting student teachers, rooms for the meetings, introducing the student teachers to teaching in classrooms, arranging meetings between the student teachers and role holders and allocating time for meetings of student teachers with pedagogical instructors. In the third steering committee meeting it was proposed by the college that the steering committee should deal in realizing mutual needs: 'The college needs to understand the needs of the school and reconstruct studies at the college, just as the school adapts itself to the needs of the college in training the student teachers.' This shows progress in the perception of the partners compared to the first meeting where needs were separated according to 'us and you.' In later meetings (6, 8), a discussion was held in which representatives of the college propose integrating needs raised by the schools in the new training program that was being constructed and the proposal of the steering committee was implemented in the new curriculum for training student teachers. They regarded it as an opportunity to create a real partnership out of a common interest and to create a dialogue about the desired teachers for the schools. They suggested constructing the curriculum together. Another example for common dialogue that expresses common needs can be found in the ninth meeting. For example, attending to excelling pupils was defined as an essential need for the college as well as for the schools and it was proposed to jointly develop knowledge and action on this issue.

Collaboration in Making Decisions

In the early steering committee meetings the college was the initiator, leader and decider on PDS issues, in spite of a formal declaration about collaborative intentions. In

practice, there was no real partnership in making decisions. The school representatives expressed reservations about the imbalance in decision making. In later meetings the decisions were made in collaboration, for example pertaining to the definition of the formal and informal role of a mentor teacher in the PDSs.

Trust and commitment

Building mutual trust began with the schools' suspicion and non-recognition of the professional ability of student teachers and pedagogical instructors. The pedagogical instructors also did not trust the abilities of the mentor teachers. An example for this can be found in the pedagogical instructors' complaint that mentor teachers do not enable student teachers to realize the program. They also noted that when the pedagogical instructor comes to a staff meeting and intervenes in the process of preparing a test, his participation is questioned (meetings 2, 3). Therefore, the steering committee discussed the professionalism of the mentor teachers and pedagogical instructors and they came to a mutual conclusion that the pedagogical instructors and mentor teachers can learn from each other.

The process of fully opening the schools' doors to the student teachers was complex. The college staff emphasized the importance of exposing the student teachers to all school situations, whereas school staff emphasized the intimacy needed between the teacher and his pupils: 'Very often tension is created between the boundaries of the partnership, many of the student teachers and pedagogical instructors are removed from the everyday framework in order to preserve the intimacy of the institution. The implication of a promise for partnership should be examined' (meeting 3).

The goodwill among all partners helped overcome the absence of mutual trust, as can be seen in opening the programs and curricula of training student teachers for examination and criticism by the mentor teachers. Another example was a harsh discussion on the schools' criticism of the student teachers' academic level and the college's criticism of the conservatism of the schools: 'The field tells the college that the student teachers have nothing to give and that the college is "disconnected" from the field...' (meeting 4). 'In the college, covert messages are sometimes transmitted on what goes on in the school, in the sense that what goes on there is not relevant, is conservative, and that it is preferable to ignore what goes on there, and the school broadcasts a message that the college sits in an ivory tower and is not relevant to the field in practice.'

Another example for trusting mutual abilities can be seen in meetings 5-6, where schools were asked to express their opinion on the college's new program for training student teachers. One of the college liaisons suggested that mentor teachers should give workshops on class management to the student teachers. Trust and mutual appreciation were apparent in the last two meetings, where discussion on the issue of excellence took place as learning among equals, between the college and each of the schools, and it was decided to plan progress on this issue together in all the learning frameworks.

The concept of the PDS was presented by the college staff in the first meeting of the steering committee as a process that requires long-term bilateral commitment from all participants. They highlighted the idea that commitment must go beyond random events such as a one-time lecture or action, but should rather be an unceasing connection. In meeting five, the question of whether this is a transient intervention program or ongoing partnership was discussed. The college staff again clarified the long-term commitment by noting that they are working with the school for the long term and are changing from 'supplying fish' to 'supplying fishing rods,' both in the college and in the school. The intention is to train student

teachers with an orientation of real schools, such that the commitment should be for the long term.

Professional Development

The issue of PD and its implementation among the partners was raised repeatedly as a major leading concept in the PDS. In the first two meetings of the steering committee, a request was raised by the school principals to clarify the potential hidden in the PDS for advancing and developing the teachers in the school. In the third meeting, PD was presented to the steering committee by the college as an ongoing process that involves all partners: 'The concept of "a school for PD" is that all partners are found in a joint process of ongoing development: training student teachers, empowering mentor teachers, pedagogical instructors, the school staff, strengthening the disciplinary knowledge of mentor teachers.'

Specific fields on which the PD of the mentor teachers should focus were also raised during the discussions of the committee in the first two years, including professionalism in content knowledge, planning the learning, developing interdisciplinary programs, developing ethical codes, teamwork, communication skills, cultivating competencies in affording feedback and reflection on the student teacher's work.

In practice, focus during the first eight years of establishment of the PDS was on the PD of the mentor teachers and the pedagogical instructors. An in-service training program was constructed in light of the PD needs raised by the mentor teachers. One of the principals stressed the need to supply solutions in the in-service training for the unique needs of each school and for common needs of all PDS partners (meeting 5).

The quality of the student teachers' training was discussed from pedagogic and disciplinary aspects. The issue was already raised by representatives of the college during the second meeting of the steering committee: 'What constitutes the training of a good teacher?' Reference was made to the issue of learning and teaching values by viewing the establishment of the PDS as an opportunity to make a radical change in training student teachers, so that the training will be unique. In meeting four, the need to shift from focusing on training student teachers solely in the classroom to training that has a holistic view of the school system was stressed, as was the need for tighter integration between theory and practice during training.

Discussion

The research focuses on the discourse and functioning of the steering committee in the PDS in order to examine the contribution of the steering committee in meeting the mutual needs of the partners. The required essentials of PDS described by the NAPDS (2008) are reflected in the establishment of the steering committee and the processes it promotes. According to the essentials, the steering committee is actually the structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection and collaboration enabling the development of the PDS. This committee is therefore positioned as one of the major structures in the PDS (Teitel 2003; Zilberstein et al., 2001).

The literature concerning the PDS refers mainly to the 'what' and not to the 'how,' i.e. there have been very few partnerships that maintain any public descriptions of their work (Allsopp et al., 2006). The content of the discussions described here reflects the processes of developing the partnership in the PDS. Breault and Breault (2012) emphasize the underrepresentation of the voices of administrators, students and university faculty in PDS writing. Research about PDS steering committees, as presented in this research, enables

raising awareness of the participants' voices. The findings reveal the potential of the steering committee as a framework that allows building a relationship of trust and goodwill among the partners, promotes empathetic discourse about different needs and empowers all partners to act in order to fulfill these needs.

The findings indicate that the steering committee in the PDS discussed in this study served as a consulting committee for outlining policy. In practice, some of the policy was implemented in the college and/or the schools, such as developing learning communities or changing the college curriculum. The unique aspect of the steering committee in the PDS described here is that its participants are not only stakeholders and experts, but are also part of the PDS and actively participate in implementation of the decisions. In the steering committee, all participants played significant roles in the PDS sites and this may have dictated the direction of outlining policy rather than supervision and control. Thus, the steering committee functioned as a platform for discourse about needs and the action needed to be taken in order to meet the needs.

The findings indicate that with time, the discussions of the steering committee became more meaningful and did not deal only in procedures. Several conditions enabled this situation: commitment – from the first meeting, the concept of the PDS was presented as a process that demands bilateral long-term commitment of the participants; ownership – when the members of the steering committee feel ownership over the raised issues, the commitment to carry them out increases and relations of trust and partnership increase; common goal – the aspiration to improve processes and products in the PDS is expressed, for example, in the attitude of the student teachers, mentor teachers and pedagogical instructors towards the PD, for the benefit of all partners.

Discussions of the steering committee and development of relationships between members of the steering committee serve as a reflection for the complex relationships that evolved between the college and the partner schools in the PDS. Cochran-Smith (1991) described three models for these relationships: the consensus model, the critical dissonance model and the collaborative resonance model. In the steering committee discussed in this article, a major part of the discussions at the beginning demonstrate the consensus model. In the last discussions, beginnings of the collaborative resonance model can be discerned. This collaborative resonance model, where the steering committee participants are also those who jointly execute the insights from the discussions of the steering committee, may also contribute to understanding the difficulties and the successes. Conduct according to this model may lead to more fertile discussions and more educated action following them. An essential condition for acting according to this model is the construction of a partnership and relations of trust. Such a model can therefore not be expected to be implemented in the first discussions of the steering committee, but rather will evolve concomitantly to the development of the discussions in the steering committee and PDS.

The development process takes place concomitantly on two fronts: in the steering committee itself and at the schools and the college. The steering committee can actually be viewed as a microcosm for what goes on in the PDS network, with reference to the contents that were discussed, the manner of leading and the processes that were developed.

In the aspect of the content at the beginning, both the steering committee and the schools focused on procedures. Later the focus shifted to more essential contents and long-term planning, such as the essence of the partnership, joint planning of the student teachers' training, programs that include disciplinary experts, etc. With reference to processes that were developed, some of the ideas and opinions raised by the steering committee were implemented in the college and in the schools. The influence of the steering committee's discussions on the student teachers' training in the college was expressed in several fields, mainly due to the 'needs dialogue.' In the schools, the influence of the discussions of the

steering committee is expressed mainly in the PD of the mentor teachers and in a change in their role perception and their actual functioning as expressed in the maintenance of a learners' community of student teachers, pedagogical instructors and mentor teachers (Klieger & Oster-Levitz, 2012).

The steering committee succeeded in supporting both social intelligence and social capital (Zaccaro & Klimoski 2001). Social intelligence is reflected in the stakeholders' understanding of the emotions and intentions of the other participants in the partnership and in achieving a level of mutual respect and sympathy (Breault 2005). Social capital is reflected in the stakeholders' understanding of the needs, expectations, norms, and shared knowledge (Coleman, 1988, 1990).

The research has some limitations: 1. Ten minutes are a small sample, 2. No interviews were conducted with partners over the years that could contribute additional perspectives, 3. The role of minutes from additional steering committees should be examined in order to enable a broader picture.

Conclusion

The research shows that a steering committee is essential for outlining policy and activating processes in the PDS. Its functioning can be improved by the participation of additional stakeholders, such as student teachers, representatives of the local authority and representatives from the community who can illuminate new points of view.

It is very important that the steering committee listen to the voices of the field, i.e. the PDSs. The school needs, and not only those of the institution of education, should be taken into account. These voices made a significant contribution in promoting the partnership. The ability of the steering committee to relate to the needs of all partners enabled the promotion of the partnership and increased the trust between the partners. This is one of the significant roles of the steering committee.

It is recommended to enable schools to exercise greater leadership in issues discussed by the steering committee and in the PDS itself and to increase the trend that developed in recent years of holding real discussions and making decisions, not just reporting, persuading and requesting confirmation.

The findings of the present study can help in formulating recommendations on the importance of the steering committee, its contribution to the partnership and meeting the needs of the partners for implementing policies in the PDS as well as for development and innovation.

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