Essential 1: justice is our “comprehensive mission”

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Abstract

Purpose – To detail the revised Essential #1.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a description and case study of Essential #1.

Findings – This article includes the following elements: details of the rationale behind the revisions to the Essential; highlights of the specific changes to the Essential; and definitions of the key concepts related to the Essential.

Practical implications – This article provides the following: a “Deepening Our Learning” section, with a description of the Essential in action that might help others to integrate this ideal into their teaching and teacher education practices; and a reflection on potential impacts of the new elements of each Essential on existing or new PDS work.
Overview

This article is one in a series to be published in *PDS Partners (PDSP)* to explore the revised Nine Essentials of the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2021). The Essentials are one of the core contributions of NAPDS to the field of teacher education in the association’s less than two-decade-long existence. These principles were originally drafted and published in 2008 as a guiding light for school- and university-based teacher educators dedicated to working in school–university partnership and Professional Development School (PDS) contexts. Each article in this *PDSP* series explores one of the Essentials and its recent revisions, and includes the following elements:

1. Details of the rationale behind the revisions to the Essential
2. Highlights of the specific changes to the Essential
3. Definitions of the key concepts related to the Essential
4. A “Deepening Our Learning” section, with a description of the Essential in action that might help others to integrate this ideal into their teaching and teacher education practices
5. A reflection on potential impacts of the new elements of each Essential on existing or new PDS work

In support of the evolution of this important document and to support educators’ implementation of these revised guiding ideals, NAPDS has declared 2021 the “Year of the Nine Essentials.” In addition to exploring the revised Essentials through this *PDSP* article series, the association is hosting an array of virtual chats and podcasts, supporting the dissemination of other publications highlighting these new principles, and engaging members in documenting how they are enacting these grounding notions.

Introduction

This article in this *PDSP* “Essentials” series examines Essential 1, “A Comprehensive Mission” (NAPDS, 2021). The original Essential 1 was summarized by this statement:

A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community.

Revised Essential 1 is now summarized in the following way:

A PDS is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

The full revised Essential 1 includes this description:

While schools/districts, colleges/universities, educator preparation units, and their respective community and professional partners are guided by unique commitments, the mission statement of a PDS explicitly describes the shared promises of its collaborative community. It is imperative – essential – that PDS mission statements articulate shared visions for promoting equity and social justice.
Additionally, the mission statement should address the following four PDS pillars (Holmes Partnership, 2007):

(1) The improvement of P-12 student learning;
(2) The joint engagement in educator preparation activities;
(3) The promotion of professional growth of all its participants; and
(4) The construction of knowledge through intentional, synergistic research endeavors.

What’s new in the revision
In 2015, NAPDS celebrated its tenth anniversary as a professional organization at its annual conference, which took place in Atlanta, Georgia. This event also represented a critical moment in the association’s evolution, as members and leaders were already recognizing a need for the Nine Essentials document and these founding principles to be re-examined and revised. While the Essentials were less than ten years old, members were already aware of some of the limitations of their content. And, as a still very young organization, few traditions had been firmly established, and the association and its leadership were nimble enough to respond to the pressing needs of members and current issues in the field.

As well, the persistent question of the intended use of the Essentials had become more acute. Dedicated school- and university-based PDS collaborators lamented that these guiding principles were largely aspirational, and that this collection of nine ideals suggested to many that the existence of a PDS was an “all or nothing” affair: that is, you were a PDS if you effectively addressed all of the nine, and you were not if you marginally addressed or failed to address any fewer. Other critics noted that the Essentials could not be implemented with reliability without supporting descriptions of their elements.

With regard to Essential 1 – the focus of this article – NAPDS members were more and more concerned about a potentially significant omission, represented by the statement’s lack of explicit language addressing issues of social justice and antiracism. The increasingly divisive rhetoric in our nation’s political debates, anti-immigrant public sentiments and policies, growth in economic disparities, and oppressive, police-sanctioned, and too often murderous violence against Black people all demanded that revision to the Essentials begin with an explicit naming of the Association’s stance on and educators’ roles in addressing these issues. Thus, the new Essential 1 calls on all of the constituents of PDSs – from preservice teachers to college of education deans – to strongly advocate and lead the fight for equitable teaching, antiracism efforts, and bridging opportunity gaps for our nation’s students.

Revised Essential 1 also named the original core purposes of the PDS model in its summary description. As articulated and restated throughout the Holmes Partnership publications of the 1980s and 1990s (Holmes Group, 1986, 1995) – which detailed the founding structures of PDSs – the following were the four, core PDS objectives:

(1) The improvement of P-12 student learning;
(2) The joint engagement in educator preparation activities;
(3) The promotion of professional growth of all participants; and
(4) The construction of knowledge through intentional, synergistic research endeavors.

While the full collections of the original and revised Essentials addressed elements of these four goals, the amended Essential 1 was intended to serve as a comprehensive, overarching
statement for the entire assemblage of the updated principles. Thus, in a way that was not articulated or understood by the original Essentials authors, Essential 1 is now the cornerstone of the Essentials, and this social justice mission is now explicitly stated as the primary pillar upon which the other standards of PDSs are built.

Key concepts related to the revision
To best support PDS constituents in understanding and readily implementing the revised Essentials, each is now enhanced by specific glossary terms included in the full Essentials publication. The following definitions are provided to articulate the key concepts in Essential 1 (NAPDS, 2021):

Antiracism: Antiracism is the action of opposing and condemning prejudice and discrimination of individuals or groups of people based on their race/ethnicity through various methods. Antiracism aims to actively challenge racism and demand change in policies, behaviors and ideas that preserve racist beliefs and actions.

Equity: Equity in education involves the implementation of anti-oppressive interactions, practices and structures that ensure that every individual has an unbiased, impartial, responsive and appropriately scaffolded opportunity for academic and professional success. An equity approach to education addresses discriminatory and systemically marginalizing actions and traditions related to race/ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, nationality and various other intersecting identities.

Social justice: In a PDS, a commitment to social justice encompasses the belief that all members of the community contribute to disrupting inequitable interactions, practices and structures, with a focus on enhancing each individual’s opportunity to learn and succeed. Social justice ideals involve anti-oppressive and equity-oriented practices.

Deepening your learning: snapshot cases of revised Essential 1 in action
To illustrate the revised Essential 1 in action and to help others understand how they might integrate this principle into their teacher education, PDS and school-university partnership work, we offer two brief, related cases of Essential 1 – in operation in a university-based teacher education setting and functioning in a classroom context. These cases are drawn from the collaborative work of the four co-authors of this article (all of whom have been variously involved with our school-university partnership work at George Mason University). Their application of Essential 1 is best illustrated by the “Stories of Injustice” they call on preservice teachers and high school students to write, a project rooted in the Social Justice “Seed” of the Secondary Education (SEED) program with which they are all engaged via their Mentor Partner Network.

A mentor partner network
The first author and three of the co-authors of this article – Zenkov, Haddad, Crane and Lague – are all affiliated with the SEED program, respectively, as a university-based teacher educator, a school-based teacher educator, a very recent graduate, and a 2015 graduate and current instructor. For nine years, the program has operated with a school-university partnership orientation with up to 16 partner middle and high schools from across four school divisions in the counties surrounding the university. Because the program has never been able to address the majority of the original Nine Essentials, faculty have not deemed it a “Professional Development School,” choosing instead to describe its structure as a “Partnership Network.”

Over the past year – beginning just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – the English education track (the largest of the six subject areas covered by the approximately 200-student program) has piloted a new partnership approach, focusing on mentor teachers who are graduates of the program as the key participants, rather than on entire schools as the
foundational structures. We devised and have tested out this shift for a host of reasons, including these graduates' familiarity with our program ideals and features, our ability to be more intentional about mentor selection and matching due to our knowledge of these teachers and their pedagogical philosophies and styles, and the ability to readily communicate about our candidates’ clinical experience needs via our previously established alumni network.

*The SEED social justice Seed*

The SEED program at George Mason University is oriented around five principles, each of which translates into specific practices and behaviors in classrooms, schools, communities and the broader world.

1. Social Justice
2. Inquiry and Reflection
3. Advocacy and Agency
4. Partnership and Collaboration
5. Respect for and Relationships with Youth

We appealed to the original and revised Nine Essentials for the development of these “Seeds,” paying particular attention to Essential 1. As a result, the integration of the Essentials into our program structures has become a more authentic endeavor. The “Social Justice” Seed also appeals to the college’s Core Values, represents both the ideals and applications of the College of Education and Human Development Dispositions, and explicitly draws on the NAPDS definition of social justice and Essential 1:

The SEED program’s commitment to social justice encompasses the belief that all members of our SEED, university and school communities contribute to disrupting inequitable interactions, practices and structures, with a focus on enhancing each individual’s opportunity to learn and succeed. Social justice is also closely aligned with “equity,” which involves the implementation of anti-oppressive interactions, practices and structures that ensure that every individual has an unbiased, impartial, responsive and appropriately scaffolded opportunity for academic and professional success.

Each Seed is defined and evidence of their implementation is identified in SEED program courses and clinical experiences, across our four-semester master’s licensure sequence. SEED students are expected to apply the Seeds as determined by instructors via course assignments, to determine their own applications of the Seeds in and across all of the classroom contexts in which they work while in the program, and to project how they anticipate the Seeds will take shape in their daily activities as they complete a capstone teacher research project and transition into the teaching profession.

*Stories of injustice – from teacher candidates to young adults*

To scaffold teacher candidates toward an understanding of, appreciation for and application of social justice ideals as articulated in the SEED Seed and in Essential 1, we – first author Zenkov and fourth co-author Lague – call on future English teachers to craft narratives about injustice that eventually inform their first lesson plans. The stories are the first element of multi-genre compositions, through which teacher candidates document an equity-oriented subject of their choosing with texts they crafted (e.g. this Story of Injustice, a justice-focused research essay, and a poem) and select (e.g. visuals, social media, research reports, etc.). The project is described in the syllabus as an “exploration of a justice-related topic related to English instruction you want to learn about and share with your future students,” in part “to consider how our teaching work can help to make the world a more just place.” We call on
candidates to consider “injustice” rather than “justice” issues because they are each required to eventually detail how they and their future students might address these injustices. Candidates are asked to compose this story in a form that they would ask their future students to both read and write, with content that they expect these young people might encounter in their lives or in the school curriculum.

More recently, we have explicitly extended our consideration of Essential 1, through our implementation of our piloted mentor network approach with teacher candidates. Specifically, second co-author Haddad and third co-author Crane called on their students to draft their own stories of injustice in their co-taught classes. Haddad was a veteran teacher, a first-time mentor teacher and a graduate of our program who had crafted her own story of injustice years earlier; Crane was completing his internship while being mentored by Haddad, after having developed his own story of injustice during his first semester in the program a few years prior.

During their unit on “Community and Equality,” the juniors in Haddad and Crane’s classes read Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* and engaged in critical and compelling student-led classroom discussions. They discussed the major themes and events in the book in small groups and as a whole class, and they also considered the book’s connections to relevant topics around them and in their newsfeeds. Students connected prior learning as they analyzed the unreconciled history of enslavement, which subsequently led to the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Students communicated their surprise as they learned about the American legal system and the continued injustices that occur within this system of power. This text and this unit created an ideal space for the Story of Injustice project.

As a culminating unit assessment, students researched the connections between Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* and a topic of their choosing. Students then explored their own voices, crafting stories that addressed topics that ranged from the Black Lives Matter movement, to the effect of absent parents, to voter suppression, and to sexism in women’s sports. Some students chose to represent their stories in Google Slides through narratives or images, others recorded podcasts, and one student wrote and illustrated a book detailing his experience as a former bully and his path to becoming a better person. In their final presentations of these narratives, students acknowledged the complexities of the injustices they were examining, and of the task of identifying measurable steps to contribute to solutions to these inequities.

At the end of the school year, students completed a brief feedback survey about their learning. The majority of students chose the Story of Injustice project as the most engaging activity of the year, appreciating the chance to express what they viewed as injustices. This project also gave Haddad, Crane and the students the opportunity to discuss how to cultivate empathy, as students repeatedly noted that although the injustices they detailed were different, they recognized that they all shared in the human condition.

**Impact and implications of revised Essential 1 for PDS efforts**

First author Zenkov and fourth co-author Lague’s work around social justice within the SEED program at George Mason University and the piloted mentor network led by second co-author Haddad and third co-author Crane are a few examples that illustrate how the key concepts (social justice, antiracism and equity) of revised Essential 1 can be highlighted within PDS and partnership networks. Within the larger contexts of PDS, revised Essential 1 calls on us to create partnerships between schools and universities that share the common goal of implementing initiatives that explicitly focus on—rather than just optionally feature—social justice, antiracism and equity. This work can begin with critical conversations about what it means to reimagine current PDS work with the revised Essential 1 in mind, as well as what is needed from individuals, K-12 schools and universities to put revised Essential 1 at the very heart of PDS and partnership work. These critical conversations around need are important because social justice, antiracism and equity work require constant and ongoing critical reflection by the individuals...
and the collectives who are committed to these principles. There must be dialogue within the PDS and partnership networks around the meaning of these key concepts, as well as a willingness by all constituents to experience both comfort and discomfort around these concepts. What might result is a deeper understanding of what individuals – members of our PDS or school–university partnership learning communities – need to do to begin the work of advancing social justice, antiracism and equity within these contexts.

In addition to these critical conversations, PDSs and partnerships should complete evaluations of current initiatives, teacher education and PK-12 assignments, and/or mentorship opportunities within their networks, as well as formally and intentionally reflect on what needs to happen with the larger structures of their collaborations in order to align current work with the revised Essential 1. In the cases shared above, the constituents of the SEED program and of the Mentor Partner Network clearly articulated missions to advance social justice, antiracism and equity via their partnership endeavors. The SEED program’s five principles – including an explicit focus on social justice – and the pilot mentoring network’s implementation of a Story of Injustice project demonstrate how the revised Essential 1 might be enacted. Such examples are not just illustrative: they are imperative for pushing PDS and partnership networks into meaningful action that centers social justice, antiracism and equity within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Conclusion
Through their shared project – the Story of Injustice – these cases illustrate how an equity-, antiracism- and social justice-focused mission can inform practice at both the university and school levels, within PDS and school–university partnership contexts. The Story of Injustice project serves as our preservice teachers’ first and often most impactful opportunity to connect their own experiences in schools with their future teaching, envisioning – just as the young people in Crane’s and Haddad’s English classroom did – their role in creating a more just and equitable society. In particular, these cases show the pedagogical possibilities within a strong partnership network in which teachers, teacher educators and teacher candidates feel empowered by this shared mission to provide meaningful experiences for young people. The Story of Injustice project described in these cases validates young people’s and teacher candidates’ experiences in a way that traditional school activities often do not, inviting any and all voices into the conversation. Perhaps most salient to our partnership’s commitment to Essential 1, the Story of Injustice project enables all participants – from teacher candidates to young people – to articulate their own missions for promoting equity and social justice in our schools.

References


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