A call for critical PDS: infusing DisCrit into the nine essentials

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Abstract

Purpose – The field of Professional Development Schools (PDS) continues to evolve with promising implications. As part of advancing practice, the National Association for Professional Development Schools has updated its nine essential guiding principles, which now includes an explicit expectation for all PDS partners to advance equity, anti-racism and social justice. This article is a call for critical professional development work which infuses Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) practices into achieving the Nine Essentials.

Design/methodology/approach – In this call-to-action article, the authors argue that it is imperative for the whole of PDS work to establish a priority for inclusive practice that recognizes and responds to all aspects of diversity in education from the outset, including disability. The authors suggest that PDS work must be guided by an intersectional approach that is operationalized to achieve equity in education by dismantling both racism and ableism in education. The authors use an action-based example from our PDS work to exemplify these elements in practice.

Findings – In this article, the authors put forth two arguments that they urge their PDS colleagues to consider. First, the authors call for practices within PDS to give attention to improving student learning in ways that specifically address disability and intersectional considerations related to disability. Second, the authors urge that PDS work must be conceptually and practically inclusive in order to achieve the social justice impact put forth in the comprehensive mission of the Nine Essentials.

Originality/value – There is a growing body of literature around PDS that addresses theory to practice research and best practices in PDS settings. While some recent publications address inclusive PDS practices, the authors were not able to identify any works related to DisCrit in the PDS literature to date.

Keywords Professional development schools (PDS), Disability studies in education (DSE),
Disability critical race theory (DisCrit)

Paper type Practitioner paper

Introduction

The field of PDS continues to evolve in the literature and in practice. This growth, and the increasing presence of PDS schools and networks around the US, is a promising possibility for addressing the critical needs we see today in P-20 education and teacher preparation. The National Association for Professional Development Schools' (NAPDS) (2021a) mission promotes "advanc[ing] the education profession by providing leadership, advocacy and support to sustain professional development schools as learning communities that improve student learning, prepare educators through clinical practice, provide reciprocal professional development, and conduct shared inquiry" (para 1).

NAPDS essentials addressed: Essential 1 - A professional development school (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, anti-racism and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

The authors of this article are both faculty of inclusive education at a State University, members of the NAPDS and Professors-in Residence (PIRs) in schools within a PDS district. A priority of our work centers on creating more inclusive education access and outcomes for students identified with disabilities in our schools. Our participation in PDS work has demonstrated the need to call specific attention to dis/ability [1] and social justice imperatives for students with disabilities in PDS work. We use the broad term "PDS work" frequently throughout this article as we recognize the diverse landscape of PDS and the multiplicity of practices, applications, and site-specific and contextually driven ways that PDS partners engage in doing PDS work.

In this article, we put forth two arguments that we urge our PDS colleagues to consider more intentionally and systematically in PDS work. First, we have observed a lack of attention to improving student learning that specifically addresses dis/ability and intersectional considerations related to dis/ability. Within the last five years, Elder and a few others (Elder, 2019; Elder, 2020; Elder, Givens, LoCastro, & Rencher, 2021; Woodfield, Elder, Rencher, & LoCastro, 2021) have introduced Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and DSE-informed practices of PDS work to support inclusive education into the PDS literature. However, there is still an obvious gap in practice related to this work within the broader PDS field. We argue that inclusive education and inclusive outcomes must be prioritized within any comprehensive implementation of the PDS Nine Essentials, and especially within the charge of the 2021 policy statement issuing the Revised Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021c) which we discuss in detail later in this article.

Second, we want to explicitly state that PDS work must conceptually and practically be inclusive. Therefore, we want to be clear that previous mention of "inclusive PDS" (Elder, 2019, p. 23) must not be read as something different or additional to PDS. We raise this as a point of clarification and critique because naming some applications of PDS work as "inclusive PDS" and others as "PDS" risks furthering a binary that only "certain" PDS work is inclusive and/or attends to inclusive education. This could essentially reify the normal/abnormal and us/them binaries that have sustained dichotomous systems for general education and special education, and that continue to drive our approaches to students and providing services. In other words, it is imperative that PDS as a whole create a priority for inclusive practice that recognizes and responds to all aspects of diversity in education from the outset, including dis/ability. This can help ensure that PDS work is guided by an intersectional approach that is operationalized to achieve equity in education by dismantling both racism and ableism [2] in education.

As an example of what an intersectional approach to race and disability could look like in practice, some of the methods used to inform decision-making and action steps at Elder's PDS include ongoing team communication (i.e. monthly steering committee meetings where meeting agenda reflects the school's shared goal and input from any of the committee members, weekly check-ins with school administration, PDS teacher liaisons and other PDS Steering Committee members as needed); action plan meetings with PDS stakeholders, the student and their family (held three times per year to specifically target issues of race and disability, and desegregating self-contained classrooms); and use of co-teaching collaborations between classroom teachers and the PIR to provide access and accommodation to students in the general education classroom. These methods have evolved over the last six years at this PDS based on a shared goal to address the documented overrepresentation of students of color in segregated classrooms in this school. Additional details about the implementation of these practices are included later in this article in the sections for Theory to Practice and Filling the Gaps of PDS: Leading by Example.

History of PDS

PDS practices are attributed to John Dewey (c. 1894) at the University of Chicago, where he developed lab schools that served as sites for both teacher training and research through school–university partnerships (Colburn, 1993). Since then, PDS structures have been leveraged to disseminate best practices in teacher education (Zenkov, Shiveley, & Clark, 2016). Research cites clinical practice opportunities within PDS as one way to positively impact student outcomes (National Research Council, 2010). Additionally, PDS practices have been used to achieve a variety of outcomes (Snow, Flynn, Whisenand, & Mohr, 2016) including (a) improving teachers' professional identities (Conaway & Mitchell, 2004), (b) promoting reflective teaching practices while instilling confidence in clinical interns (Stairs, 2011), (c) curating demonstrable teaching skills within interns (Castle, Fox, & Fuhrman, 2009) and (d) elevating the cooperating teacher's instructional practices (Yendol-Silva & Dana, 2004). While these are compelling outcomes associated with PDS, there remains a significant gap in the literature related to how PDS can be used to ensure dis/ability and inclusive education are integral components of PDS. This is particularly important as NAPDS has revised its Nine Essentials through a lens of anti-racism and social justice.

The Nine Essentials

From its inception over 35 years ago, PDS work has been predicated on nine essential guidelines. As PDS work has gained momentum, there was a need to update the original nine essentials in an effort to more clearly articulate the term "professional development school" and to present the essentials as practical goals for all doing PDS work (NAPDS, 2021c). The revised nine essentials confirmed many aspects of the original statements, as well as specifically identified new areas in need of attention. The updated 2021 policy statement is available in a publication titled, "What it means to be a Professional Development School: The Nine Essentials 2nd Edition."

The comprehensive mission in Essential #1 (NAPDS, 2021b) now states:

> 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, anti-racism and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

This article focuses on the addition of expectations for all partners and stakeholders to advance equity, anti-racism and social justice across all echelons of P-20 education. This explicit call for attention to equity, anti-racism and social justice in PDS work comes at a time when critical race theory and its use in education is under intense public scrutiny and resistance (Sawchuk, 2021). As the NAPDS invites, "by coming to terms with the challenges and opportunities inherent in this statement [Nine Essentials 2nd Edition], we can collectively fulfill the vision of this remarkable and distinct partnership we call PDS" (2021c). The revised comprehensive mission for PDS work is an example of policy realigning to the current needs of practice and an opportunity to ground PDS work in race and disability.

Grounding PDS work in race and disability theory

The fact that combined intersectional discussions of disability and race are missing from the larger PDS conversation suggests a need to infuse both DSE (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008) and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) in Education frameworks (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013) into PDS work. Here, we have listed the key tenets for readers in the PDS community who may be unfamiliar with these frameworks and/or the connections between them.

The tenets of DSE (AERA, 2019) are organized to engage in research, policy and action that (a) contextualize disability within political and social spheres, (b) privilege the interest,

agendas and voices of people labeled with disability/disabled people; (c) promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability/disabled people and (d) assume competence and reject deficit models of disability.

As articulated by Annamma *et al.* (2013, p. 11), the seven key tenets of DisCrit are (a) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normality; (b) DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race *or* dis/ability *or* class *or* gender *or* sexuality, and so on; (c) DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms; (d) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research; (e) DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens; (f) DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens and (g) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

In our practice of PDS work, both authors use DSE and DisCrit tenets to create the foundations of sustainable inclusive education practice. We locate our practices of PDS work as utilizing a critical approach to innovative practice aimed at addressing the ethical responsibility that all schools have in deconstructing racism and ableism. Outlined by Connor *et al.* (2008) as possibilities for DSE, we hope that our practices of DSE and DisCrit informed PDS push forward toward constructing intersectional discourses and approaches to disability in education, addressing the dissonance between DSE and special education, and provide "explicit and tangible examples of ways in which DSE undergirds classrooms practices" (AERA, 2019, p. 2). This article grew out of ongoing collaborations between Elder and Damiani, but now with specific attention to their PDS work as PIRs in the same PDS District. Elder was entering his sixth year as a PIR at his PDS when Damiani joined the network as new PIR. From that context, Damiani questioned why Elder (2019) had written a road map to PDS work that named engaging disability as inclusive PDS work, wondering if this designation could inadvertently create a bifurcation of practices within PDS where inclusive initiatives are the work of some, rather than a collective responsibility of all PDS community partners. Elder explained that his intention was to fill the gap in PDS literature with inclusive education- and DSE-informed practices, and not to separate his work from other emerging critical PDS practices. Hence, the impetus for this article.

Theory to practice
A larger impetus for the work at Elder's PDS school has been a response to the overrepresentation of students of color in segregated classrooms. At this racially diverse PDS, a Title I [3] public school in Northeastern United States, there are approximately 500 students in grades four through six. About 84 students, or about 17% of the student body, have individualized education programs (IEPs). Of those students, 62% are African American, 19% are Hispanic, 16% are white and 0.02% are Asian. These statistics indicate that 68 of the 84 students with IEPs, or 81%, are disabled students of color. Unfortunately, this data represents a national trend of minoritized (i.e. racial, ethnic and linguistic minorities) students being disproportionately placed in segregated special education classrooms (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In an effort to desegregate this school, this PDS team has enacted numerous approaches including implementing strength-based approaches to special education (Elder, Rood, & Damiani, 2018; Weishaar, 2010), person-centered planning (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1991; Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989) and holding action plan meetings (Sailor, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Skrtic, & Oas, 1996). Each year, the

PDS Steering Committee focuses on six students (i.e. two students per grade) to be more meaningfully included with their non-disabled age-appropriate peers. While the demographics of these students might change each year depending on student need, families moving in and out of the district, and other various factors, invariably the majority of students each year are disabled students of color. At the time of writing, more than 30 students had been supported through this process. Some of these students were fully-included as a result, and others were provided with additional inclusive opportunities during their school day.

While this PDS team of practitioners was always discussing the intersections of race and disability and the need to desegregate their school, they had never explicitly claimed their work under the banner of "DisCrit" (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). However, in conjunction with the ongoing research at this PDS and the serendipitous new release of the revised NAPDS Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021b), the time is right to ensure that PDS, inclusive education, DSE and DisCrit do not evolve separately from the need for anti-racism in PDS work. We are calling for dis/ability to be systematically incorporated into the fabric of PDS.

Filling the gaps of PDS: leading by example

Tending to the notable patterns of overrepresentation at their school and the absence of inclusive education in PDS literature, the school's PDS team developed their collaborative research focus around ways to make explicit connections between their PDS goals and supporting students with disabilities. In doing so, they were expanding previous related research where PDS was used to improve clinical interns' knowledge on how to support students with disability labels [4] (Walmsley, Bufkin, Rule, & Lewis, 2007), enhance the professional growth of special educators (Voltz, 2001) and improve attitudes of teacher candidates toward inclusive education practices (Strieker, Gillies, & Guichun, 2013). Thus, this PDS team's application of PDS work in their school responds to Waitoller and Artiles' (2013) call for professional development for teachers that infuses an intersectional approach to understand disability and difference to improve inclusive education practices. While rare, these studies mentioned above represent the emergence of ways to better support students with disabilities labels inclusively through PDS research.

In practice, members of this PDS Steering Committee promoted teaching practices that placed the onus on teachers to create a more inclusive campus (e.g. providing students with disability labels with modified school work, and training school staff on inclusive education). As demonstrated in Table 1, the PDS Steering Committee at this school (housing Grades 4–6) is comprised of diverse representation from a wide range of stakeholders. The different roles and perspectives of each of these contributors were integral to the collaborative goals of PDS and to a comprehensive approach to identifying and implementing their collaborative research focus and action steps within the school.

Further, connecting PDS, inclusive education, DSE and DisCrit meant that there were sustained conversations happening about inclusive education as a social justice issue, and students with disabilities and their families were at the center of all PDS actions.

The PDS Steering Committee was one structure that was used to disseminate emerging findings/practices, and to make future plans for the PDS. In addition to serving as question posers in practice, school partners were also critical contributors in various aspects of conducting research and disseminating the results of that research to the field. In their role as PDS Liaisons, these individuals were also involved in data collection and analysis as they conducted interviews and member checks, and attended weekly Lead Supervisory Meetings with the PIR and the clinical interns. Furthermore, the PIR co-authors and co-presents PDS scholarship resulting from the work at this school site with PDS Teacher Liaisons. Thus, school partners' perspectives are infused throughout the scholarly work done at this PDS in all stages as question posers, data gatherers and data analyzers along with university faculty.

Position
PIR
Co-Liaison, 6th Grade ICS
Co-Liaison/Grade 5 ELA
Principal
MD Teacher
6th Grade Inclusion
5th-6th Self-Contained
4th Grade Inclusion
Gifted and Talented Teacher
6th Grade ELA
SEL Teacher
Ph.D. Student
Basic Skills Instructor
Speech Therapist
5th Grade
5th Grade Inclusion
4th Grade Self-Contained
5th Grade Inclusion
4th-8th ESL
6th Grade Clinical Intern
5th Grade Clinical Intern

Table 1.
Positions of members
of site-based team (PDS
steering committee)

These collaborations and the resulting student outcomes are used to understand the efficacy of intersectional approaches to PDS work and to determine the school's next steps.

As a way to make clear what these actions looked like in practice, Woodfield *et al.* (2021) conducted a study using video research methods to highlight emerging inclusive practices at this school site. They did this to (a) explore how video research can foster reflective opportunities related to inclusive education; (b) highlight professional leaders in the PDS; (c) reframe students with disabilities through a strengths-based perspective and (d) curate a bank of best practices, all with the intention of infusing a more critical social justice lens into PDS practices. This was an intentional call to both the fields of PDS and DSE to think more critically and inclusively about what it means to do "critical" PDS research.

Conclusion
This article represents a call for a more comprehensive, intersectional and inclusive reframing of PDS work. Our call is particularly timely and responsive to the revision of the NAPDS's Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021b). At this time, attention to infusing disability into the larger framework of PDS research is primarily being done only by disability studies scholars. We hope that by providing an ongoing, context-specific example in practice we accomplish three goals. First, we want to illuminate successful DisCrit informed work among PDS practitioners. Second, we want to identify DisCrit informed-PDS work as a pathway of critical importance for all PDS practitioners. Third, we want to demonstrate that this critical application of theory to practice is not only necessary but that it is both possible and actionable as evidenced by on-the-ground outcomes currently happening within innovative PDS work. We again reiterate that inclusive practices in PDS must take a proactive and intersectional approach that recognizes disability rights work as inextricably connected to anti-racist work. Desegregating schools with a DisCrit lens (Annamma *et al.*, 2013) is inherently anti-racist, and the PDS Nine Essentials should reflect these realities. Finally, with this article, we hope to initiate a dialogue with PDS researchers and practitioners to critically analyze the current trends in PDS in order to create an even more robust framing and application of the Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021b).

Notes

1. Goodley (2014) uses the term dis/ability to establish that both disability and ability are categories in need of interrogation. Consistent with Connor, Ferri, and Annamma's (2016) use of dis/ability, we also use a slash line punctuation mark to counter the emphasis on having a whole person be represented by disability as deficit and what they cannot do, instead of what and how they can do, as well as to disrupt notions of the fixity of the concept of disability, turning instead to a need to analyze the entire context in which disability and disabled people operate.

2. Ableism, like other forms of discrimination (e.g. racism and sexism), refers to social prejudice and discrimination against disabled people, and how certain attributes and experiences of disability are valued or not valued through demands for able-bodiedness (Wolbring, 2008).

3. At this Title I School, roughly 45% (i.e. 225) of our students live at or below the poverty line.

4. The authors use the phrase "students with disability labels" purposefully to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of disability and how such labels are subjective and placed on people who deviate from an imagined norm (Taylor, 2006).

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