

# Partnering to support K-12 instruction of difficult topics through inquiry-based professional learning

Partnering for  
difficult-topics  
instruction

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Boaz Dvir and Logan Rutten

*The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA*

Danielle Butville

*The Pennsylvania State University, Reading, Pennsylvania, USA, and*

Eric Wilson

*Red Lion Area School District, Red Lion, Pennsylvania, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Many K-12 teachers teach difficult topics as part of their curricula, and discussions of difficult topics are common across grade levels and content areas. As teachers increasingly engage with difficult topics in their classrooms, the need for high-quality professional learning experiences has also grown. In response, the purpose of this article is to introduce an emerging partnership between the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State and the Red Lion Area School District (Red Lion, Pennsylvania), conceptualized from the outset with an explicit focus on intentionally engaging in collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning surrounding difficult topics in formalized curricula and within educational practice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article briefly describes how the partners came together, then provides a high-level overview of how they approached their first year of collaboration. Next, the partners' adaptation of inquiry-based professional learning is outlined. The article concludes by discussing lessons learned from the first year of partnering and implications for scholarship in the areas of school-university partnerships, inquiry-based professional learning, and difficult topics.

**Findings** – The article observes that it took educators participating in a difficult-topics inquiry community an entire year to begin shifting ownership of inquiry to K-12 students. It illustrates how school-university partnerships can be used to support difficult-topics inquiry and raises new questions about the role of difficult topics in partnership work.

**Originality/value** – The article contributes an original example to the literature that demonstrates how inquiry-based professional learning focused on difficult topics can provide a powerful basis for forming a school-university partnership.

**Keywords** difficult topics, practitioner inquiry, professional learning

**Paper type** Practitioner paper

K-12 teachers and students are no strangers to difficult topics. Many educators are already required or encouraged by law, state standards, or local curricula to teach about topics such as racism, slavery, bigotry, genocide, and human rights violations (e.g., [Florida Legislature, 2023](#); [Missouri General Assembly, 2022](#); [New York State Education Department, n.d](#); [Stillman, 2021](#);

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*NAPDS Essentials Addressed*: Essential 3 (Professional Learning and Leading), Essential 4 (Reflection and Innovation).



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Tennessee Department of Education, n.d). Irrespective of grade level or content area, teachers face controversial and divisive issues that arise during both planned and unplanned classroom discussions (Cassar *et al.*, 2021), in the lunchroom, at school board meetings, or in virtual instructional spaces.

As the range of difficult topics in schools evolves, so do the professional learning needs of teachers. Prior scholarship has emphasized that teachers frequently shy away from difficult topics for a wide range of reasons such as a lack of knowledge about particular topics, a belief that some topics are not age-appropriate for their students, or fear of community backlash, (Cassar *et al.*, 2023; Hess, 2004; Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Misco & Patterson, 2007), yet traditional approaches to professional development, which tend to be rooted in efforts to impart knowledge and skills (Garet *et al.*, 2001), are ill-equipped to provide the kinds of support that many teachers now require. One promising approach to supporting teachers in addressing difficult topics is to engage them in high-quality professional learning focused on growing their capacity to make well-reasoned and evidence-informed decisions about the difficult topics they teach or encounter. For professional learning to be effective, however, it must be sustained, intensive, reflective, content rich, collaborative, and responsive to individual and collective needs (Desimone, 2009; Learning Forward, n.d.). Professional learning exhibiting these characteristics has long been a hallmark of school-university partnerships (National Association for Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021).

Recent scholarship has described how school-university partnerships have been responding to a wide range of difficult topics such as racism and inequities deepened by COVID-19 (e.g. Bertrand *et al.*, 2021; Leftwich *et al.*, 2021). However, few if any partnerships have been conceptualized from the outset with the explicit purpose of fostering learning that supports teachers and students in intentionally seeking out and engaging with the challenges associated with difficult topics. In response, the purpose of this article is to introduce an innovative and growing collaboration between the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State and the Red Lion Area School District. The partners engage in professional learning that supports educators in making informed decisions about difficult topics and implementing responsible classroom instruction surrounding these topics. Following a brief overview of literature on difficult topics in K-12 schools, this article describes the partners who have been collaborating in a professional learning project focused on difficult topics. Next, the partners' approach to professional learning is outlined. The article concludes by considering some potential implications of the partners' work for their own and others' future partnership efforts.

### Conceptual orientation

A wide range of topics has been deemed “difficult” in the context of K-12 schooling and continues to be identified by differing labels. This article uses the term “difficult topics” broadly, encompassing several related terms. *Difficult knowledge*, one of the original terms (Zembylas, 2014), refers to information that can be psychologically or emotionally traumatic based on individuals' backgrounds or experiences. *Difficult topics*, including *difficult history* (Gross & Terra, 2018; Stoddard *et al.*, 2017), refers to topics that are discomfiting, painful, or morally confusing. Additional terms such as *tender topics* (Mankiw & Strasser, 2013) and *contentious topics* (e.g. McCully *et al.*, 2002) identify content that provokes emotional debate or intense ideological disagreement. These different types of difficult topics are not mutually exclusive, commonly overlap, and vary in how individuals experience them.

Despite the challenges presented by difficult topics in K-12 schools, prior research posits a wide range of potential benefits for students—such as enhanced skills in critical-analytic thinking, empathy, and civic discourse (Haas, 2020; Middaugh, 2019; Pace, 2019)—when teachers nevertheless engage with such topics through an inquiry-based approach (Rutten, 2022).

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Supporting teachers to adopt an inquiry stance, especially during turbulent times, is a challenge recognized in teacher education and professional learning literature (e.g. [Barnatt, 2009](#); [Bennett, 2013](#); [Smith, 2012](#)). Simultaneously assisting teachers in utilizing inquiry as difficult-topics pedagogy for their students presents additional challenges and possibilities.

### Launching the partnership

Developing an approach to professional learning that combines trauma-informed and educational equity lenses on difficult topics within an inquiry community ([Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009](#); [Wolkenhauer & Hooser, 2020](#)) through the process of practitioner inquiry ([Butville et al., 2021](#); [Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020](#); [Rutten, 2021b](#)) was the innovation that characterized the work of the partnership outlined below. The following subsections introduce the partnering institutions and describe how they began collaborating.

#### *Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State*

The Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State (i.e., the Initiative) teams up with school districts to support K-12 educators throughout Pennsylvania, and beyond, in teaching difficult topics through inquiry. Participating educators join inquiry communities, explore interactive online modules, and engage with Initiative pedagogical experts and faculty, as well as community partners who share their knowledge and insights into historical and contemporary subjects. The Initiative supports educators as they and their students adopt an inquiry stance toward the challenges impacting their lives and communities.

The Initiative collaborates with school districts to tailor each inquiry community to focus on the specific difficult topics that educators and students in that context are experiencing and wanting to address. Communities typically begin with a summer launch and continue with regular meetings throughout the school year. Educators experience the inquiry process, adapted from the work of [Dana and Yendol-Hoppey \(2020\)](#), as they systematically investigate their own practices surrounding difficult topics, then are supported as they begin to engage K-12 students in inquiry. At the end of each year, inquiry communities gather for a celebration and sharing of learning that involves educators, students, and community members.

#### *Red Lion Area School District*

Located in south central Pennsylvania, the Red Lion Area School District (i.e., the District) encompasses 8 municipalities across 144 square miles. The District educates about 5,000 students at one senior high school, one junior high school, and six elementary schools. With such a large expanse geographically and an increasingly diverse student population, the District works to personalize its programming to meet the needs of all students.

The District strives to provide a personalized approach to professional learning. To appropriately support staff members in their personal and professional growth, teachers have multiple opportunities each year to take part in District-provided learning experiences. Also, teachers have the ability to construct their professional growth plan, pulling from the large number of resources available to them. The District believes this approach has empowered staff to become self-advocates, thereby enhancing their sense of professionalism and enabling them to grow much more than in a traditional professional development model.

As an extension of its professional learning philosophy District administrators noted that, amid a climate of polarization, educators were having increased difficulties engaging with difficult topics in the curriculum and community. When approached by the Initiative with the opportunity to provide teachers with support with teaching difficult topics in curriculum and addressing difficult topics in the school community, the partnership began to take form. Teachers would be equipped with the skills and dispositions to successfully navigate difficult

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topics. Also, the inquiry process could guide them to cultivate an inquiry stance among their colleagues and students throughout the District.

### *Initiating the partners' collaboration*

In April 2021, school districts in south central Pennsylvania were embroiled in controversies involving COVID-19 safety protocols and school and classroom library books. As a result, District administration sought resources and support when they connected with Boaz (Author 1). District leaders shared they wished to consider a multiyear collaboration from the start. They expressed an eagerness to support educators' professional learning, including their difficult-topic instruction, and to offer new opportunities aligned with their vision. The District also sought to align the collaboration with Pennsylvania teacher evaluation requirements and to adopt an innovative approach to incentivizing teachers to participate by offering to treat their participation in the program as the equivalent of three graduate credits toward salary-scale movement in accordance with its collective bargaining agreement with the teachers' union.

Boaz, Logan (Author 2), and other Initiative personnel introduced the 2021-22 program to all District teachers at an end-of-year teacher inservice day in May 2021. Initiative personnel described inquiry-based professional learning focused on difficult topics. They emphasized that this opportunity was open to all educators, regardless of grade-level, content area, or formalized role. They next met with interested teachers in small groups to begin brainstorming potential foci for shared and individual inquiries. Teachers who participated in this meeting then completed a survey in which they reflected on topics they were currently teaching or addressing within their classrooms that they deemed difficult. They also shared how these topics intersected with their professional roles and social identities and whether they could commit to participating throughout the 2021-2022 school year. Twenty District educators committed to collaborating in a pilot program during the upcoming school year. Participants ranged widely in their professional assignments and included general and special education teachers in Kindergarten through 12th grade, as well as a school administrator.

### **Program description**

In July 2021, teachers convened for a summer launch co-facilitated by Eric (Author 4), Logan, Danielle (Author 3), and another Initiative colleague. They aimed to build a supportive and sustainable inquiry community, construct shared understandings of inquiry as a stance and an approach to professional learning and pedagogy, and conceptualize shared and individual "wonderings" for fall inquiries into practice. Following the launch, Initiative personnel met with all teachers individually to grow their relationships and assist them in claiming, then refining their wonderings. Over the summer, teachers also completed the Initiative's online trauma-informed practices module (i.e., [Leo et al., 2021](#)), which was created by Initiative and other Penn State personnel with the aim of supporting K-12 educators in this and other partnerships in learning to utilize trauma-informed practices, to grow shared understandings of how a trauma-informed perspective could strengthen their inquiries.

After the start of the school year, the inquiry community began to meet biweekly to engage simultaneously in the shared and individual inquiries they had initiated at the summer launch. Together, the teachers crafted the question: "How can we, in our roles, help create a culture of respect in which students and the school community feel safe, supported, connected and valued across differing experiences and perspectives?" Individual teachers pursued a wide range of inquiries. Some focused on difficult curricular content and others on difficult issues within their professional practices. For example, a 7th grade English/language arts teacher asked, "How can I engage my students in discussions of difficult topics with people who have different opinions?" A 4th grade teacher wondered, "How can we assess and own where we stand on issues of equity

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and inclusion without scaring stakeholders away?" A school administrator asked, "How can we reduce class cuts and office referrals in our building?"

Throughout the fall semester, the inquiry community's facilitators purposefully used the teachers' shared wondering as a tool for building common understandings of the inquiry process. In response to their shared and individual wonderings, teachers collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data, analyzed case studies focused on bias and educational equity (i.e., Gorski & Pothini, 2018), engaged in critical reflective practices to identify and address any biases and inequities that may have been perpetuated by their inquiries, developed informed conclusions to guide future action, and shared their learning with one another in multiple formats. The semester culminated in a time of celebration and reflection on the fall inquiry process, individually and as a community.

During the spring, teachers reconvened to plan for intentionally inviting K-12 students into the inquiry process. As they engaged with Initiative pedagogical and content experts, they navigated the difficulties of utilizing inquiry to position their students as agents of their learning while simultaneously inquiring into their own, emergent practices for doing so. They framed their spring inquiries by an overarching question, "How can we, in our roles, support our students to adopt an inquiry stance toward difficult topics?"

At least initially, many of the teachers responded to their overarching question by taking a more teacher-directed approach in which they framed wonderings about difficult topics for their students and invited their students to join in investigating these questions. For example, a Kindergarten teacher asked her students to collaborate in a group inquiry framed by the question, "How does practicing kindness impact our classroom community?" An upper-elementary teacher whose curriculum involved teaching a novel pertaining to the Holocaust engaged her students with the question "How do people decide if, when, and how to act against authority?" Three special education teachers engaged in intersecting inquiries into the questions "How can we help our students labeled with disabilities grow in their ability to advocate for themselves and their needs?" and "How can we [i.e., as a classroom community] advocate for our own needs?" The school administrator's inquiry evolved to include her entire building's teaching staff in exploring how they could foster a positive school climate and more equitable discipline policy.

Other educators adopted a more student-led approach to inquiry in which students framed their own wonderings. For example, a 6th grade teacher created space for student inquiry into self-selected difficult topics within the community. By the end of the semester, most of the teachers were contemplating how they could take a more student-led approach to incorporating inquiry from the beginning of the next school year. Similar to the fall semester, the spring concluded with a celebration and sharing of inquiry findings, this time within and beyond the inquiry community itself.

### **Discussion and implications**

This article aimed to provide a high-level overview of how one growing school-university partnership with a focus on learning through inquiry into difficult topics approached its pilot year. While an analysis of data from the pilot year will be shared in future publications, the unique contribution of this article is to provide a case-in-point of how a professional learning program could be structured in response to educators' needs for support in addressing difficult topics. To the school-university partnership literature, the article offers a distinctive new example for educators in other partnerships to consider, adapt, and problematize. Similarly, to the literature on inquiry-based professional learning, the article contributes a case of an inquiry community that was purposefully designed to combine practitioner inquiry for professional educators with a focus on inquiry-based pedagogy. To the difficult topics literature, the article contributes an illustration of how teachers in one school district

responded when presented with the opportunity to engage in authentic, localized inquiry into the difficult topics in curriculum and educational practice that mattered to them.

Although the work described in this article is being continually refined, it nevertheless suggests several potential implications locally and broadly. For the partnership itself, the understanding that it took most participating educators an entire year to move from learning the process of inquiry into difficult topics to adapting and testing inquiry as pedagogy in their classrooms to shifting ownership of inquiry from themselves to their students is particularly noteworthy. This phenomenon has been well-documented in teacher education literature (e.g., Bjørke *et al.*, 2022; Macias *et al.*, 2022; Rutten, 2021a) and was replicated here. This further reaffirms the well-documented need for professional learning to be sustained over long durations and authentically rooted in local understandings of difficult topics in curriculum and practice, rather than being steered by university researchers' agendas. The work further suggests the need for the partners to develop structures that will grow the partnership beyond the pilot year. This need is already being addressed, as teachers from the pilot year continue collaborating into a second year, joined by other teachers they have recruited to join with them as inquirers.

For other school-university partnerships, this work could provoke fresh questions. Who gets to determine which topics are considered "difficult" in a partnership? Does the partnership have an institutionalized process, such as inquiry, for engaging intentionally with these topics, or are the topics ignored, silenced, or simply overshadowed by other issues? Which and whose perspectives are typically brought into discussions of difficult topics, and which are absent? How might a practice of intentionally seeking out discussions of difficult topics intersect with the partnership's mission statement and existing commitments to equity and antiracism? Such questions may offer potentially significant starting points for local discussions and inquiry. They also offer possibilities for future scholarship about school-university partnerships.

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### About the authors

Boaz Dvir directs the Hammel Family Human Rights Initiative and the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State. An award-winning filmmaker, Dvir tells the stories of ordinary people who transform into trailblazers. They include a teacher who emerges as a disruptive innovator (*Discovering Gloria*); a World War II flight engineer who transforms into the leader of a secret operation to prevent a second Holocaust (*A Wing and a Prayer*); a truck driver who becomes an effective child-protection activist (*Jessie's Dad*); and a Holocaust survivor who sets out to kill his father's Nazi executioner (*Cojot*).

Logan Rutten is an educator whose research examines practitioner inquiry as a form of professional learning for educators across the career span within school-university partnerships such as Professional Development Schools (PDSs). He is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching, Leadership, and Professional Practice at the University of North Dakota and Affiliated Faculty with the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State, where the work described in this article was conducted. Rutten is Associate Editor of *The Cambridge Handbook of School-University Partnerships* (forthcoming). Logan Rutten is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [logan.rutten@UND.edu](mailto:logan.rutten@UND.edu).



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Danielle Butville is Assistant Director and Assistant Research Professor at the Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education Initiative at Penn State. Dr. Butville is a teacher educator whose research and practice explore practitioner inquiry as a form of professional learning and inquiry-based learning for K-12 students. In recognition of her student-centered scholarship, Dr. Butville was awarded a grant from the Conference on English Educators (CEE) and the James Moffett Memorial Award by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

Eric Wilson is an educational leader who collaborated to conceptualize and launch the innovative partnership described in this article. At the time of writing, Wilson served as Chief Instructional Officer at the Red Lion Area School District (Red Lion, PA).

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