Mutually beneficial? Middle school educators' perceptions about the benefits and challenges of a school–university partnership

Michael DiCicco and Shawn A. Faulkner
Department of Teacher Preparation and Educational Studies,
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The paper identifies and explores the perspectives of middle school educators regarding the benefits and challenges of an ongoing, emerging school–university partnership. Over five years, professors at one comprehensive, Midwestern university, formed a partnership with a local middle school. While progress has been made to develop the partnership, the authors recognized a lack of shared governance (Essential 7). In particular, they were unsure the partnership was mutually beneficial. The authors interviewed teachers, the principal, assistant principals, guidance counselors, the instructional coach and the youth service center director to gain their perspectives on the partnership.
Design/methodology/approach – The authors used an intrinsic, evaluative case study to examine educators perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the partnership (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 2002). This approach was used because within this bounded system the authors have an interest in obtaining information to help improve the program and partnership.
Findings – Results suggest the partnership was beneficial in a number of ways including hiring of and offering fresh ideas to teachers. Educators also felt there were many benefits for university candidates. Challenges included scheduling, technology access and candidate disposition. Implications are discussed.
Research limitations/implications – Inherent within the research methodology, researchers' inclusion in the data collection process may affect participants responses.
Practical implications – Researchers discuss the implications of this work, including the role of hiring candidates and clear articulation of a mission for the partnership.
Originality/value – This work adds to research on school site stakeholders' perspectives on the value of school–university partnerships and includes teachers and the schools' entire leadership team.

Keywords Educator voices, Middle school partnership, Shared governance, School–university partnership
Paper type Research paper

NAPDS Nine Essentials addressed:

Essential 1 A Comprehensive Mission: 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.

Essential 2 Clinical Preparation: A PDS embraces the preparation educators through clinical practice.

Essential 3 Professional Learning and Leading: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

Essential 5 Research and Results: A PDS is a community that engages in collaborative research and participates in the public sharing of results in a variety of outlets.

Essential 7 Shared Governance Structures: A PDS is built upon shared, sustainable, governance structures that promote collaboration, foster reflection and honor and value all participants' voices.

Professional development schools (PDS) provide mutually beneficial opportunities for schools and universities to impact student learning, grow new and seasoned teachers alike and create collaborative research to improve education for all (Holmes Partnership, 2007). Effective PDS sites that adhere to the Nine Essentials (National Association of Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021) have been shown to be high quality examples of school–university collaboration and models of developing and meeting educational goals (AACTE, 2018; Levine, 2006; Robinson, 2007).

There are many reasons for both teacher preparation programs and school sites to develop a PDS. However, the creation of a PDS takes shared goals, effective collaboration and time to develop and mature. Over the last five years, professors at one comprehensive, Midwestern university formed a partnership with a local middle school to develop a PDS. While the authors feel significant progress has been made to develop the partnership, including embedded university courses at the middle school site, closely coupled field experiences, shared resources and an articulated agreement, they do not believe all Nine Essentials are yet fully achieved. While, they worked closely with the principal, assistant principals, counselors and teachers on a near-daily basis, the authors recognized a lack of shared governance (Essential 7). In particular, the authors felt the partnership benefitted their candidates, particularly in clinical practice (Essential 2), but they were unsure whether or not the partnership benefitted the teachers, students and other stakeholders at the site. Until recently the authors have not engaged in formal systematic structures for school educators to provide their voices and have not conducted research to share our story and innovation (Essential 5). To that end, the purpose of this evaluative intrinsic case study is to address the following research question: What are middle school educators' perceived benefits and challenges of a middle school–university partnership?

Perspectives

This study was supported by trends over the past decade to learn about teaching by applying what is learned in the context of school with students. As Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2005) stated,

> . . .teachers benefit from participating in the culture of teaching—by working with the materials and tools of teaching practice; examining teaching plans and student learning while immersed in theory about learning, development, and subject matter. They also benefit from participating in practice as they observe teaching, work closely with experienced teachers, and work with students to use what they are learning. And this learning is strengthened when it is embedded within a broad community of practitioners—experienced teachers, other student teachers, teacher educators, and students. . ." (pp. 405–406).

Zeichner (2010) supported the assertion of Darling-Hammond *et al.* He reported a "perennial problem" of university-based teacher preparation programs was the lack of connection between university courses and field experiences. He bridged this gap with the creation of what he called a "third space," or a hybrid space to bring together preservice teacher preparation and practitioner knowledge in schools (Zeichner, 2010). These hybrid spaces can take many forms, as Zeichner described, but they typically involved some form of professional development school or on-site learning environment that moved teacher preparation from the university campus to the school campus.

The researchers are university professors whose teaching and research are grounded in an understanding of the middle grades philosophy as outlined in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), the position statement of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). One characteristic of a successful middle school is employing teachers and administrators who "are specifically prepared to work with and

advocate for young adolescents through specialized middle grades professional preparation" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 25). According to Bishop and Harrison, specialized preparation occurs both preservice and through ongoing professional development. They further state partnerships, "provide preservice teachers an opportunity to make connections between theory and practice, foster the continuous development of practicing teachers, and collectively work to improve middle grades students' learning experiences" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 26). Bishop and Harrison (2021) as well as other middle grades advocates (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006) highlight the importance of specialized preparation for teachers, emphasizing the value of clinical experience in the middle school classroom providing the opportunity for preservice teachers to connect theory to practice.

Partnerships, like those outlined by the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, 2021), described by middle school philosophy (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006) and encouraged in recent trends in teacher preparation research (Darling-Hammond, 2009, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2010) are further supported by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the major accrediting body for teacher preparation. In its revised 2022 accreditation standards, CAEP (2021) expects providers to "co-construct mutually beneficial P-12 school and community arrangements for clinical preparation" (CAEP Standard R2.1) and work "with partners to design and implement clinical experiences, utilizing various modalities, of sufficient depth, breadth, diversity, coherence, and duration..." (CAEP Standard R2.3). Thus, the accreditation standards also support the development of mutually beneficial partnerships to help strengthen the connection between theory and practice.

While CAEP does not provide a formal definition of a "mutually beneficial partnership," it defines a partnership as a "mutually beneficial agreement among various partners in which all participating members engage in and contribute to goals for preparing education professionals" (CAEP, 2020a). When recommending such partnerships in 2016, the CAEP State Alliance Clinical Partnership Design Team further suggested there are three elements that shape mutually beneficial partnerships. These elements included "common vocabulary, co-constructed goals, and aligned expectations that have a positive impact on students, faculties, and educational organizations" (CAEP, 2020b). From their study of school, community agency and university partnerships, Bosma et al. (2010) concluded for a partnership to be mutually beneficial, communication, shared decision making, shared resources, expertise and credibility, time to develop and maintain relationships, champions, being present, flexibility, a shared orientation and recognition of the other partners' priorities were keys to a partnership's success. Though each defined mutually beneficial slightly differently, as Trube et al. (2018) stated, "*Mutually beneficial* denotes reciprocal activities that result in 'win-win' situations for all major stakeholders." Therefore, for our purposes, a mutually beneficial school–university partnership for teacher preparation is an agreement between a school and university built upon common goals and expectations that will benefit both institutions and the individuals they serve.

Studies examined the voices of PDS stakeholders as well as teacher candidates in the development of their partnership (Rychly et al., 2020; Toshioka et al., 2016). When considering the retention of teachers, Thornton (2004) found teachers valued teaching based on best practices and focused on learners, teacher voice in instructional and curricular decisions and professional growth as part of the teaching role. Similarly, Snow-Gerono (2009) examined what PDS teachers value in the school–university partnership. Veteran PDS teachers felt it was important for teacher candidates to be dedicated to their profession and have the mindset to always do what is best for students. Teachers also felt the structure of the program needed to include more time in the classroom to experience "real" school. Finally, teachers valued

mentoring teacher candidates. They did not want to initiate candidates into teaching through trial by fire, but through co-teaching and collaboration (Snow-Gerono, 2009).

When documenting the experiences of teacher candidates and teachers in an emerging PDS, Rychly *et al.* (2020) found teachers valued building relationships with teacher candidates, were uncertain about their role as mentor and found it difficult to align school and university structures (class times, class requirements). In order to better understand our emerging PDS partnership, researchers in this study sought to answer the following question: What are middle school educators' perceived benefits and challenges of a middle school–university partnership?

Methods

The authors used an intrinsic, evaluative case study to examine the benefits and challenges of the partnership (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 2002). Case study research is used to provide analysis and detailed description of a bounded system (Stake, 1995), in this case an emerging, embedded middle school–university partnership. Researchers conducting intrinsic case studies are interested in learning about the case itself, rather than learning about the case to accomplish some other means (instrumental study) (Stake, 1995). Evaluative case studies aim to provide a description and/or explanation of a case with the end goal of providing judgment (Merriam, 2009). An intrinsic, evaluative case study was used because, as participants in this program, the authors had an interest in obtaining information to help improve the program and partnership.

Context

Local middle school (LMS) (pseudonym) is located in a semi-urban area located several miles from a large, metropolitan city in the Midwest. The school is part of a small, independent school district and it is the only middle school in the district. According to the 2021 state report card, LMS had a school population of 564 students in grades six through eight. It was a Title 1–eligible school with 70.4% of the students considered economically disadvantaged. Demographically, students were 66% White (non-Hispanic), 12.1% two or more races, 11.2% Hispanic or Latino and 10.7% other. The student body of LMS consisted of 11.7% students with disabilities, 4.8% English learners and 5.9% identified as students in transition or homeless. To meet the needs of the students at LMS, there were three administrators, two school counselors and a teaching staff of 36 teachers with an average of 9.6 years of experience.

Middle grades university (MGU) (pseudonym), a regional comprehensive public university with a population of nearly 16,000 students, was located 15 minutes east of LMS. The university had a long history of community engagement and strategic partnerships with its current strategic framework encouraging experiential learning, partnerships and engagement with external organizations. Housed within the College of Education, the middle grades education program graduated nearly 30 middle grades teachers annually. The faculty of the middle grades program partnered directly with LMS.

The middle grades education program at MGU spanned four semesters. Candidates enrolled in a series of pre-admissions courses that provided them with a broad foundation in a range of topics such as educational history and philosophy, lifespan development, diversity, special education and technology and engaged in a series of observations and field experiences to help them determine the grade level they desire to teach. The two following semesters, middle grades teacher candidates engaged in courses and field experiences that introduced them to middle level philosophy, curriculum and planning; pedagogy for teaching content and literacy in the middle grades; educational assessment; instructional planning for inclusive classrooms; and approaches for classroom management. During both professional semesters, candidates had field experience placements in area schools in classrooms that corresponded

with their chosen content teaching areas. These two semesters were referred to as Professional Semesters 1 and 2. The final semester of the program was a 16-week clinical experience in a local school with the time divided equally between the candidates' two content teaching areas.

MGU and LMS have had a long-standing relationship, primarily for the placement of teacher candidates in LMS for field and clinical experiences; therefore, when MGU began exploring the notion of creating a "third space," or an opportunity to move middle grades teacher preparation from the university to a middle school setting, LMS was a natural consideration. After discussing the concept with the principal, he agreed to host a couple of MGU classes on-site at LMS during the spring 2018 semester. At the conclusion of the spring 2018 semester, both MGU and LMS determined there were potential benefits to both partners if the on-site preparation of teachers continued. MGU and LMS entered into a formal two-year memorandum of agreement for 2018–2020, later renewed for 2020–2022 and 2022–2025. The agreement outlined the nature of the partnership and the responsibilities of both partners.

As part of the formal partnership agreement, MGU agreed to teach three foundational courses from Professional Semesters 1 and 2 of the middle grades program on site at LMS. The courses included were Fundamentals of Middle Grades Education, Reading and Writing across the Curriculum and Classroom Climate Management. They were taught in a dedicated classroom at the middle school referred to as the "MGU Room." LMS supplied the classroom with appropriate furniture and technology, and instructors were given freedom to create a space that would support their instruction and the needs of the teacher candidates in their classes.

Taking classes on site at LMS required teacher candidates to travel to the school, dress professionally and participate in the regular daily operations of LMS. Instructors designed class activities and assignments that allow them to take advantage of having university courses embedded within the middle school context. Activities such as, visiting classrooms, interviewing teachers, conducting shadow studies, tutoring students, microteaching with small groups of students and interacting with panels of teachers, counselors and administrators in class to discuss relevant topics would not be feasible if the courses were held on the university campus. Candidates also interacted with students and staff by participating in school duties, attending school functions, participating in professional learning activities and assisting with special activities such as STEM night, literacy night and school dances thus learning about the non-instructional duties teachers perform while providing a service to the school. In addition, MGU and LMS agreed to place as many Professional Semesters 1 and 2 candidates at LMS for their field experience placements as possible. The number of field placements was determined collaboratively between the program faculty and school administration. During field experiences, candidates collaborated with teachers to design and implement instruction in their chosen content area concentration.

Data collection
Researchers, who are also university faculty in the partnership, conducted individual and focus group semi-structured interviews with school staff including the principal, administrative team and ten classroom teachers who served as cooperating teachers for field experience placements (n = 17) (see Table 1). Researchers conducted an individual

LMS staff	*n*	Type of interview	Data
Principal	1	One individual interview	One transcript
Administrative team	6	One focus group interview	One transcript
Classroom teachers	10	Three individual interviews and two focus group interviews	Five transcripts

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 1.
Data collection

interview with the principal and a focus group interview with the administrative team composed of two counselors, two assistant principals, instructional coach and the youth service center director. Of the 36 teachers on staff, MGU worked closely with 20 teachers representing the core subjects and collaborative special education teachers. All 20 teachers were invited to participate in focus group interviews, and of these, 10 teachers (50%) participated. Teachers participating in the study represented all grade levels (6–8), all core subject areas (i.e. language arts, social studies, science and math) and special education. Classroom teacher interviews were conducted in both focus group and individual formats. Researchers intended all interviews to be focus groups. However, due to a variety of factors including teacher duties and schedules, some sessions became individual interviews. Sample questions from the semi-structured interviews included:

(1) What benefits to you, if any, are there to having MGU students in the building/ classroom?

(2) What benefits to your students, if any, are there to having MGU students in the building/classroom?

(3) What challenges to you, if any, are there to having MGU students in the building/ classroom?

(4) What ways, if any, can we improve the partnership?

One principal interview, one administrative team focus group interview, three individual and two focus group classroom cooperating teacher interviews, totaling four individual and three focus group interviews were conducted in the spring of 2022. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed resulting in three hours and 53 minutes of audio and 97 double-spaced pages of transcript.

Data analysis
Researchers analyzed data in iterations (Anfara *et al.*, 2002) using open-coding and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2013), as well as, analytic memos (Saldana, 2013). After reading transcripts holistically to gain familiarity with the data, researchers individually coded data based on the categories of (1) benefits to the university, (2) benefits to the middle school and (3) challenges, since these were the focus of the questions in the interviews. Researchers met to collaboratively revise, edit and refine codes. Based on these codes, researchers created three transcripts from the three categories. Researchers then individually coded remaining transcripts save one. The last transcript was coded collaboratively to ensure reliability of initial coding. Axial coding was completed collaboratively (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and researchers met to revise, edit and refine codes. A total of 100% consensus was reached between researchers on all coding. Analysis resulted in 31 initial codes and a final codebook that included a total of 14 codes across the three categories.

Findings
Findings suggested LMS benefited from the partnership with MGU in many ways including hiring recent MGU graduates, having more adults in the classroom, fresh perspectives for teachers and college exposure for middle grades students. Middle school teachers and administrators also felt the partnership benefited the university program through opportunities and practice with professionalism. Challenges identified included university schedule, technology access and teacher candidate disposition (see Table 2).

Benefits to LMS
Middle school teachers and administrators expressed hiring MGU graduates, having extra adults in the building, fresh ideas and perspectives and college exposure for middle grades students were all benefits to having the partnership with the university.

Hiring. LMS educators found the partnership allowed teacher candidates to become familiar with the district, school and students helping them make decisions about where they want to teach as well as allowing LMS teachers to get a first look at potential new hires. LMS educators have also found hires from the program to be a great fit with the school culture and well prepared.

LMS educators felt a major benefit of the partnership was for MGU teacher candidates to become familiar with the district and school. A teacher noted, "We're also an independent district, so not everybody knows LMS District, where we are, what we do. . . This really helps get our name out there to those students." Familiarity with the school allowed teacher candidates to understand the culture and challenges of LMS and to know whether it was the right fit for them. The principal said, ". . .if these are people that are in your school, and have seen your culture, and have worked with your teachers and students, and they are applying for that, then they want to be there." One teacher stated, "They are prepared, they know what the expectation is here, they are not intimidated by the environment, and a lot of people can be." MGU candidates' experiences at LMS helped them make informed decisions when applying for teaching positions after graduation.

While MGU teacher candidates experienced LMS, LMS educators observed first-hand future potential colleagues. An administrator stated, ". . .having them in the building and getting to see how they interact with us as colleagues and the students, you are able to get an up-close view of what it would be like working with this particular person." Another administrator noted they get to see all the MGU teacher candidates in the building and, ". . .that's a huge advantage because we see them first-hand to see that they are a really good teacher, and we would like to have them on staff." Being able to work with MGU teacher candidates, LMS educators could see if the teacher candidates in the program would be a good fit for employment at LMS.

A benefit of the partnership has been that new hires have been prepared and a great fit for LMS. An administrator stated about recent hires, "Some teachers are stepping right in and being really outstanding from the get-go; accomplished and exemplary in some categories. And with not a ton of experience, but man they've been good. . ." LMS educators felt candidates they have hired have been well-prepared. A teacher remarked, "They know what to do, they know how to plan, they know how to plan for a diverse classroom. . .In fact, I see some of the new teachers are more natural at that than some of the experienced teachers." Overall, LMS educators found the partnership was beneficial in finding potential new hires that were familiar with the school and wanted to teach specifically at LMS.

More adults. A benefit of the partnership to the school and teachers was having more adults in the building and classrooms. MGU students had their field experiences at the school as well as participated in a number of activities, including hallway duties, helping with

Benefits for LMS	Benefits for MGU	Challenges
Hiring	Opportunities	University Schedule
More adults	Practice with the profession	Access to technology
Fresh perspectives		Teacher candidate disposition
College exposure		
Source(s): Authors' own work		

sporting events and helping with special events such as STEM night. More adults in the building meant, "... more adults with eyes on the kids, more adults caring about the kids and investing in our kids which helps us fulfill our mission," as expressed by an LMS administrator. Teachers appreciated the extra help in the classroom with their field experience students because it helped support middle grades students. One teacher noted, "I think sometimes the MGU students can take the time to sit and help a student through something that I can't do because I am managing the other 25." Another teacher noted, "...there's another adult that can help kids. With some of our kids that really struggle, I think it's really beneficial." And another teacher said, "Who would turn away free help? But essentially, we've got extra support, extra hands, extra ideas, so I think that was very, very important." Whether participating in instructional activities or field experiences LMS educators reported MGU teacher candidate involvement as a benefit to the school.

Fresh perspectives. Being younger, MGU teacher candidates offered different perspectives to LMS students. A teacher noted, "It's [MGU student] somebody that's closer to their age, so I think that they relate to them better..." Another teacher remarked, "I think it's good for them to hear another adult voice because sometimes myself and other teachers just turn into background noise because they hear us all the time." And this teacher agreed, "I think that it gives them a break from me, and I think that is healthy. ...To have that different voice, approach, and method is a nice change of pace for them." LMS teachers felt one benefit to having MGU teacher candidates in the classrooms was offering a fresh perspective to the middle school students.

MGU teacher candidates allowed LMS teachers to see new perspectives, ideas, strategies and tools as well. For some LMS teachers, having MGU candidates in their rooms helped them stay relevant. When asked about the benefits of the partnership, one teacher stated, "For me? I get to see new blood and new ideas; see how they do things..." Another teacher noted having candidates in their room is beneficial, "... to keep me relevant even as a veteran teacher for what might be some new ideas coming through the students." Another veteran teacher concurred, "I think it's good because it personally keeps me in check, these are some new strategies that are being taught, the model for teaching has changed as well ..." An administrator also saw the benefits of staying relevant. He said, "It's made our teachers more flexible, and they are able to grow their own craft because we're constantly having and teaching students in our building." The principal saw a difference in teachers incorporating new technology into their lessons. He discussed an example of a veteran teacher who created a virtual escape room after seeing it done by a practicum student. The principal felt that younger students are more willing to incorporate more technology in their lessons, and he said, "I think that just kind of sparked some of our teachers learning from some of the newer things that are coming out." Staying relevant was important to LMS teachers, and they viewed working with MGU candidates an opportunity to accomplish that goal.

College exposure. LMS educators found having college students in the building as beneficial for middle school students. A teacher stated for her students, "They have someone in the classroom who is modeling being in college, and those college students can speak to that experience if the kids have questions." MGU professors often asked for LMS students to be incorporated into their classes on the LMS campus. LMS administrators chose middle school student ambassadors to participate in MGU class activities. An administrator said, "My kids I selected to be student ambassadors come away from that day [with MGU candidates] like 'Oh, I want to be a college student' because they are asking your students questions on what college is like." A teacher noted the importance of students getting to talk to college students. She said, "...many of our students do not have people that they personally know who have gone to college sometimes so just getting to talk to somebody." With MGU teacher candidates part of the school in so many ways, LMS students were able to see and ask college students questions and were exposed to the college experience.

Benefits for MGU
LMS educators felt there are a number of benefits of the partnership for MGU teacher candidates as well. They saw the number of opportunities afforded to them at LMS such as opportunities to compare schools, experience a "real" middle school context and practice teaching. LMS educators also saw practice with professionalism as a benefit of the partnership.

Opportunities. While the MGU program is based at LMS, MGU candidates are placed in various schools in the region at various points of the program. One teacher liked that they get to experience other schools. He said, "It's a benefit. . . .seeing that it's not the same its very different wherever you go. If you don't like it in one place, that doesn't mean teaching is that bad." Another teacher agreed, "But I think that's something if you can get them out and they can see that there are differences between the different schools, because let's be honest, they're not all the same." LMS teachers felt this opportunity allowed them to compare LMS to other schools in the area. A teacher mentioned, "It's just comparative, where does [LMS District] sit compared to some other schools that the kids visit." Comparing schools allowed MGU candidates to see how different school cultures can be and helped them make informed decisions when applying for jobs.

Experiencing "real" middle school was seen as a major benefit of the partnership. MGU teacher candidates spent a lot of time in the LMS building and, as such, experienced all aspects of middle school and the teaching profession. When reflecting on forming the partnership, the LMS principal stated, "I really thought 'what a great opportunity for college students to work in a realistic setting with middle school students.'" Another administrator said, "It's valuable for them to be here in the classroom because it's exposure to the middle school world, and this world is not like any other." LMS educators felt a benefit was being able to experience all of the "extra" things that come with the job. A teacher noted it is important for students to experience these "extra" responsibilities like morning and afternoon duties, chaperoning dances and participating in family nights. She said, "Teaching is about so much more than just teaching your content in the classroom. So just exposing them to all of those things I think it's great." Teachers noted the experiences in the school to show the MGU candidates the tougher parts of the job as well. One teacher noted, "They can see that it's not all puppies and candy canes. They can see the real stuff being in the room." An administrator thought it was important for candidates to have experiences with diverse populations. When talking about field experiences at LMS, he said, "We have some challenging kids that you don't necessarily get at other schools, so you can definitely hone your relationship building with kids that are different from you." A special education teacher further noted, "They get a chance to see a lot of those different disabilities that you talk about and what does that actually look like in a classroom." It was clear LMS teachers and administrators felt a benefit of the partnership was for MGU candidates to see the realities of middle school teaching.

MGU teacher candidates worked closely with LMS teachers during their time in the program. As such, there were many opportunities for MGU candidates to practice teaching. LMS educators saw these opportunities as a benefit of the program. A teacher stated ". . . if you are teaching science, don't tell the kids about the experiment, do the experiment. . .Doing it with actual kids helps you understand how it is going to work." An administrator agreed, "You learned all of these things in all of these classes, try them out, what realistically works and what realistically doesn't work." LMS teachers and administrators felt the ability to practice not only gave MGU candidates experience, but it also allowed them to see what works for them. A teacher said, "I think they can also get an idea of how they want to teach, what works for them and what wouldn't work for them. . ." Overall, LMS educators felt there were a lot of opportunities for MGU candidates. One teacher stated, "For the ones that do take advantage of all those things, they do recognize they could pretty much do and experience anything they want if they find a way, and they can help out any way they want to." LMS

educators saw the many opportunities to teach middle school students as valuable to their development of teachers.

Practice with professionalism. LMS educators felt coming to the school multiple days a week for classes and field experiences prepared teacher candidates for the realities of the profession. An administrator stated, "They're getting ready to transition into the real work world, so making them go to a workplace in professional attire is a good transition from pajamas and slippers and online class or going to a classroom on campus." A teacher also remarked, "…it's[teaching] about dressing up and commanding the classroom and leading it and being a role model and a coach for the kids and a professional. All of it is important." One teacher further explained, "I think it also helps them in a career because it's like 'Oh I'm in a school, hey, who's that guy over there? He seems to be really interacting with kids, he seems like a real go-getter.'" Agreeing, another teacher said, "There are days when I certainly want to wear my pajamas, but I have to put my skirt on and my nice clothes on, but you need to dress professionally. You can't look like your students." In addition to experience with teaching and instruction, LMS educators saw benefits to MGU teacher candidates practicing their professionalism from their involvement at the school.

Challenges

LMS teachers and administrators largely noted there were few, if any, challenges with having this partnership. When asked about any challenges to having the partnership with the university, the principal replied, "I haven't had any, none. I have had zero, none. Knock on wood, right?" Another administrator agreed, "I don't think there's anything that I have run into that is a pain or a challenge, and I think we and the teachers in the building all recognize somebody has to take our place and fill the gaps…" The challenges that were identified related to scheduling of the field experiences, access to technology and teacher candidate dispositions.

University schedule. LMS teachers noted struggles with the field experience schedule. Based on the traditional university schedule, MGU teacher candidates had field experience on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This presented issues with continuity of lessons and finding time to plan for practice teaching of lessons. One teacher explained, "I think that it makes things more challenging for having an established routine because you don't get to see the follow through of what happened this day." Another teacher noted, "…they get here right as the day is starting, and I'm like 'Okay, let me fill you in on where we are and what we have been doing since you weren't here yesterday or the day before.'" Additionally, MGU candidates' time in the field may not align with the LMS teacher's planning period making it hard to find time to plan together. One teacher remarked that she struggled, "…finding time to meet with them to make sure we are on the same page when they are getting ready to do a lesson." Similarly, another teacher noted the biggest challenge is, "…we don't have common planning time with them, so a lot of the planning has to be done via email or when we are supposed to be working with the kids or observing the kids…" Having consecutive field experience days and having MGU candidates during planning period would help LMS teachers better mentor and plan with the candidates.

Access to technology. LMS used specific programs for their email, grades and learning management system. LMS teachers believed it is important for MGU teacher candidates to have access to these tools, so they could have experience with these tools, and collaborate more effectively. One teacher noted, "We were talking about the fact that most schools are set up in Google Classroom platform, and that doesn't jive with the MGU platform of Microsoft, and so that poses problems." Another teacher agreed stating, "…it's not that things can't be done, it just it just makes it a little bit more inconvenient." With more technology being implemented in the classroom, LMS teachers saw the need for MGU teacher candidates to be

familiar with LMS technology systems and to have easy access to these systems to collaborate freely.

Teacher candidate disposition. Teacher candidate dispositions were a challenge for some LMS educators. Being on time, being present in the classroom and being prepared for teaching were the main challenges. When asked about challenges with teacher candidates, one teacher said, "I feel like it's those habits of punctuality, of being focused on what you are here for…it's those kinds of things with that aspect of staying engaged, staying present while you're here." Another teacher noted, "I think you have students who don't take the experience seriously. I think they look at it as an easy 'A.'" Regarding planning, one teacher noted, "You can't wait until 2 o'clock in the morning and throw a lesson together and then come in and teach it." Another teacher had concerns about the thinking going into planning. She said, "I think sometimes when they're assigning something to the kids, they're not thinking through what their reason was for the assignment that they might have given to the kids." LMS teachers wanted to see MGU candidates consistently exhibiting dispositions appropriate to the profession.

Discussion

Zeichner (2010) believed university teacher preparation programs could bridge the gap between university courses and field experiences by creating hybrid spaces that brought together preservice teacher preparation and practitioner knowledge in schools. Professional development schools, including embedded courses like those in this study, offer an opportunity to address the theory–practice gap described by Zeichner; however, moving university courses to a middle school setting, restructuring assignments and collaborating to accomplish the goals of the partnership can come with benefits and challenges. Findings from this study suggested LMS educators saw many benefits and few challenges to the emerging professional development school. Regarding benefits, the principal, administrative team and classroom teachers all agreed a major benefit of the partnership was being able to hire quality candidates from the program. They noted the importance of hiring teachers who have the "right" disposition to work at LMS. That is to say, teacher candidates from MGU's program aligned with the culture of the school and understood the benefits and challenges of working with their diverse student population. LMS educators were able to interact and work closely with new hires first. They felt teacher candidates from the partnership were well prepared, familiar with LMS students and school culture, and once hired, fit into the school culture. The benefits described by LMS educators are consistent with Darling-Hammond *et al.*'s (2005) assertion that "teachers benefit from participating in the culture of teaching" (p. 405). As Darling-Hammond stated, pre-service teachers are stronger when they have opportunities to work closely with experienced teachers and the students. In doing so, they are immersed in the school culture and are able to apply what they have learned in their university classes. In the case of the partnership with LMS, participation in the PDS has strengthened the quality of candidates LMS has had the opportunity to hire from the MGU program.

In many ways MGU teacher candidates interviewed LMS as much as LMS interviewed the candidates. As a result of familiarity with LMS, the leadership team found applicants from MGU's program have a strong desire to work at the school and with the LMS student population. This was a change from the past when many applicants were unfamiliar with the district, school and students and/or were simply searching for an available job. As such, the principal and administrative team believed they were hiring candidates who were prepared to teach at LMS and fit the school culture. While it is too early to determine, the combination of hiring applicants LMS is familiar with and applicants desiring to work at LMS may lead to improved teacher retention. Graduates from the program experienced less of a learning curve during their first year as a result of their familiarity with the school, teachers, students and

culture from the variety of experiences they had in the partnership (e.g. shadow experiences, tutoring, micro teaching, participating in school events, panel presentations and field experiences). An additional benefit to hiring partnership graduates was having more teachers in the building with an understanding of MGU's program and emerging partnership as well as having an established relationship with the MGU faculty.

With so many additional duties and staff shortages, LMS educators welcomed the additional eyes and hands in the building. MGU candidates helped work with students one-on-one in classes and helped with additional duties around the school. Additionally, candidates experienced many of the duties required of teachers, which LMS educators mentioned as an important benefit of the partnership. Further, LMS students were able to see, interact and work with college students on a regular basis. Candidates served as college student role models and, in many ways, ambassadors for the teaching profession.

LMS educators wanted to stay relevant and working with MGU teacher candidates allowed the teachers to see what the candidates were learning in their college classes. This was particularly the case with technology. The interviews were conducted in 2022, after returning to face-to-face instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic, and LMS educators were still looking for ways to engage students using online resources.

Participating in the school context allowed candidates to experience both the instructional and non-instructional aspects of teaching thus expanding their participation in the culture of teaching described by Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2005). LMS educators saw many benefits to the partnership for MGU candidates, and these largely centered on helping candidates develop as new teachers. In alignment with Snow-Gerono's (2009) findings, LMS educators felt experiencing "real" middle school such as, hallway and lunch duty, PLC meetings, parent phone calls, making copies, preparing materials, navigating learning management systems and addressing student behavior outside the classroom was important to their development as a teacher. While, teachers and administrators felt MGU's program prepared teacher candidates instructionally, these non-instructional aspects were seen as important for candidates to experience because they were a key aspect to the teaching profession and teacher development. LMS educators believed teaching lessons in their field placements allowed MGU candidates to find their own teaching style and experience the realities of teaching which included the myriad of interruptions a teacher can encounter during a lesson. Having a variety of school field placements allowed candidates to experience other school cultures and student populations, and LMS educators felt this was important, so candidates could find a school that was the best fit professionally. Further, participants discussed the importance of teacher candidates learning the role of a professional by being on site. Coming to the school on time, dressed professionally and interacting with students and staff professionally were all important dispositions to becoming a teacher. As articulated by Bishop and Harrison (2021), the AMLE takes the position that teachers should be specifically prepared to teach young adolescents. Being immersed in the daily work of teaching, both instructional and non-instructional and having regular interaction with middle grades students enhanced the preparation of middle level teacher candidates and better enabled them to connect the theory learned in university classes to the middle school classroom (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; NASSP, 2006).

Few challenges were noted overall with many participants saying there were no challenges to the partnership. Scheduling was a challenge because of the university field experience schedule. LMS teachers wanted time to plan with MGU candidates and help develop a routine, but this was made difficult by the every-other-day schedule consistent with the findings of Rychly *et al.* (2020) which found teachers had difficultly aligning school and university structures, such as schedules. Technology access for collaboration was also a challenge since a majority of communication and planning between the LMS teacher and MGU candidates had to happen online. Teachers also noted some challenges with teacher

candidate dispositions such as being on time, planning in a timely manner and being "present" while in the classroom.

Implications for the future

While the authors believed the partnership with LMS benefitted their teacher candidates, particularly in clinical practice (Essential 2), they were not certain whether the partnership with LMS was mutually beneficial as described by proponents of school–university partnerships (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; CAEP, 2021; 2020a, 2020b). Based on the perspectives shared by LMS educators, the authors were confident the emerging PDS at LMS is viewed as beneficial by the school participants. Having hired 14 teacher candidates from the partnership, it was not surprising, LMS educators focused heavily on the benefit the partnership had on hiring new teachers at the school. Though hiring was a key benefit articulated during the interviews, LMS educators also focused on the development of MGU teacher candidates as teachers and finding a job that is the right fit, even if that was not at LMS. It was clear LMS educators were invested in the development of MGU candidates as teachers. However, professional learning seems to have been mostly focused on teacher candidate learning. In the spirit of Essential 3 researchers would like to engage in more conversations with the school about how to enhance the professional learning for all participants in the partnership including LMS teachers, administrators and MGU faculty.

Engaging in inquiry (Essential 5) related to benefits and challenges of the emerging PDS provided the authors the opportunity to address the lack of shared governance (Essential 7) in the current structure of our PDS. LMS educators' perspectives helped to provide insights into how we can strengthen our emerging PDS. As a result of this study, the authors were able to make some immediate adjustments to the program to address the primary challenge articulated by the LMS teachers. Teachers expressed a concern regarding the every-other-day schedule of field experiences and the impact of the schedule on co-planning. For future semesters, the authors have adjusted the class schedule and will pilot a new schedule that allows teacher candidates to fulfill their field experiences on consecutive days. Teachers also shared some concerns with technology access at the school as well as several dispositional issues with particular candidates. These issues will continue to be addressed more intentionally in the future.

Limitations

While reflecting on this collection of school–based participants' perspectives yielded important findings regarding the emerging PDS, it is important to note several limitations to this study. First, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceived benefits and challenges of a school–university partnership from the perspective of only one stakeholder group – the school-based participants (i.e. teachers, leadership team). The current study does not reflect the perspectives of teacher candidates, university faculty or middle school students, and these perspectives should be the focus of future inquiry in order to provide a more complete picture of the program's effectiveness. Second, the authors served as the interviewers during the data collection phase of the current study. The authors have developed a positive, professional relationship with the school-based participants and felt the school-based participants trusted the researchers to report their voices accurately. Therefore, the authors had no reason to believe the school-based participants altered their responses due to their professional relationships with the authors; however, the possibility exists. Lastly, the period of time examined for this case study partially coincided with the COVID-19 global pandemic. As expected, the pandemic caused some disruption to regular operations of the emerging PDS and may have impacted the responses of the school-based participants.

Conclusions

While the PDS can be described as emerging, having not fully implemented the Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021), the authors have engaged in the challenging work of establishing a PDS to prepare middle grades teachers. As we attempt to bridge the divide between theory and practice to prepare teachers who are ready to face the challenges and opportunities of teaching in 21st century classrooms, finding ways for the school and university enterprises to work together more closely is critical, even with all of the "struggle and messiness" such work implies (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 226). We must continue to embrace the struggle and messiness if we are to develop the PDS that achieves the goals outlined in the Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021).

References

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2018). *A pivot toward clinical practice, its lexicon, and renewing the profession of teaching.* Clinical Practice Commission.

Anfara, V. A. Jr, Brown, K. M., & Mangione, T. L. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, *31*(7), 28–38. doi: 10.3102/0013189x031007028.

Bishop, P., & Harrison, L. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Association for Middle Level Education.

Bosma, L. M., Sieving, R. E., Ericson, A., Russ, P., Cavender, L., & Bonine, M. (2010). Elements for successful collaboration between K-8 school, community agency, and university partners: The Lead Peace Partnership. *Journal of School Health*, *80*(10), 501–507. doi: 10.1111/j.1746-1561.2010.00534.x.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2020a). Glossary. Available from: http://caepnet.org/glossary?letter=P (accessed 19 June 2023).

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2020b). Partnering to advance mutually beneficial partnerships. Available from: http://caepnet.org/about/news-room/mutually-beneficial-partnerships (accessed 19 June 2023).

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. (2021). *CAEP revised 2022 standards workbook*. Washington, DC: Author.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2009). Teacher education and the American future. In *Presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of College for Teacher Education*, Chicago, Charles W. Hunt Lecture.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. In V. Hill-Jackson, & C. W. Lewis (Eds.), *Transforming teacher education: What went wrong with teacher training, and how we can fix it* (pp. 223–247). Stylus Publishing.

Darling-Hammond, L., Hammerness, K., Grossman, P., Rust, F., & Shulman, L. (2005). In L. Darling-Hammond, & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 390–441). Jossey-Bass.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1981). *Effective evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Holmes Partnership. (2007). *The Holmes partnership trilogy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Levine, A. (2006). *Educating school teachers*. Princeton, New Jersey: The Education Schools Project.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing.

National Association of Professional Development Schools (2021). *What it means to be a professional development school: The nine essentials* (2nd ed.). [Policy Statement]. Author.

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2006). *Breaking ranks in the middle: Strategies for leading middle level reform*. Reston, VA: Author.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). St. Paul, MN: Sage Publications.

Robinson, S. (2007). *Response to educating school teachers*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Rychly, L., Pettit, S. K., & Buning, M. M. (2020). *Lessons learned: Aligning voices from the inside with nine essentials of professional development schools*. School-University Partnerships, 13(2), 58-68.

Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Snow-Gerono, J. L. (2009). Voices less silenced: What do veteran teachers value in school- university partnerships and initial teacher preparation?. *The Teacher Educator*, 44(4), 248–267. doi: 10. 1080/08878730903186348.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. New York, NY: Sage Publications.

Thornton, H. J. (2004). What can we learn about retaining teachers from PDS teachers' voices?. *Middle School Journal*, 35(4), 5–12. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2004.11461435.

Toshioka, J., Matsumoto, V., Fulton, L., & Nakamura, C. (2016). Cultivating, connecting, and capitalizing on our merged spaces: Voices from a PDS. *School-University Partnerships*, 9(3), 111–129.

Trube, M. B., Jones, N. C., Kinnamon, K. E., Smith, L., Congrove, S., & Corcoran, K. (2018). Fostering teacher leadership for mutually beneficial programs: An early childhood PDS partnership case study. *School-University Partnerships*, 11(3), 1–21. Available from: https://napds.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Trube.pdf

Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 89–99, doi: 10.1177/0022487109347671.

About the authors

Michael DiCicco is Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Northern Kentucky University. His research focuses on teacher preparation, teacher induction and middle level literacy. Michael DiCicco is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: diciccom1@nku.edu

Shawn A. Faulkner is Professor of Middle Grades Education at Northern Kentucky University. His research interests are teacher preparation and middle school organizational structures and implementation.