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PARTNERS IN TEACHER EDUCATION: A PROGRAMME IN ALBERTA

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A persistent quest for improvement and change seems to be characteristic of Western education. New ways of thinking, doing and knowing occupy the time and energy of educators at all levels. Educators concerned with the pre service education of teachers plan and deliver programmes which vary from institution to institution. In Canada, some teacher education courses are school-based, some are traditional, some are developed from a school-university partnership model and some follow a discipline-based degree.

This article presents a descriptive account of the Teaching Partnership programme; a school based teacher education initiative implemented in September 1993 in Alberta, Canada.¹ The rationale, intentions and origin of the project are discussed. Details of the programme format and structure including changes to the traditional roles and organisation of faculty, teachers and schools involved in the preparation of student teachers are explicated. Attention is also drawn to the place of the Teaching Partnership programme within the overall offering of the Faculty. Issues related to planning and implementation are highlighted and expectations of the programme revealed. Information for the paper was collected through interviews with the faculty participants in July 1993 and from planning documents.

THE PROGRAMME

The Teaching Partnership programme is a joint initiative of the University of Alberta Faculty of Education and the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB). The programme evolved as follows. While discussing issues akin to teacher education at the Dean's Advisory Council, the Superintendent of EPSB suggested that the faculty 'do a programme in schools'. The suggestion received further consideration during subsequent discussions of the Council which is comprised of a variety of stakeholders including the Dean of Education, Dean of Arts, school system superintendents, and Alberta Teacher Association (ATA) personnel. The support of the Dean and the Superintendent was the catalyst for action. The programme is the product of their

commitment. As one member of the planning team recounted, "It started with the Superintendent and the Dean and has been working its way down."

Interested individuals were sought and a Teaching Partnership Committee was formed consisting of three members of the Faculty of Education, representatives of the EPSB and the Edmonton local branch of the ATA. It was expected that programme development and design would be a collaborative effort among the major stakeholders. The committee was able to plan free of constraints regarding course content, assignment, structure and format.

The Teaching Partnership provides an "alternative teacher education model in which theory is provided in the context of direct experience with children" (Teaching Partnership Committee Planning Document, June, 1993). It aims to contextualise the process of learning to teach. One committee member expects,

...more points of connection and more efficiency in terms of the use of their (students) time spent in seminars or library because they won't be frightened off by ignorance about curriculum topics and child development.

The Teaching Partnership rests on assumptions different from those common to many traditional teacher education programmes. The programme name emphasises the importance of the relationships between players. Participants in this school-based programme aim to interact with one another in ways that are not widespread in many current patterns of teacher training. There is agreement that "all partners learn and teach. In the atmosphere of co-learning there will be growth on the part of all concerned" (Teaching Partnership Committee Planning Document, June, 1993). An active contribution to the Teaching Partnership is called for from all participants; junior teaching partners (student teachers), senior teaching partners, principals, Faculty of Education personnel, and the Teaching Partnership Committee. A highly interactive, reflective and holistic context for learning is expected.

THE PLANNING

Launched in September 1993, the two year programme involves twenty five students who are placed in one of eight partnership elementary schools for the third and fourth year of their training. The schools vary in size, socio-economic status, location and degree of parental involvement. All schools are part of the Edmonton Public School system. Junior partners will work and live a teacher's schedule. They will take Christmas and Spring Break when schools do and will aim for daily schedules which look more like classroom teachers than like university students.

The weekly cycle for junior partners consists of three classroom days, one library day and one meeting day. The library day, negotiated with senior teaching partners, allows junior partners to read, write, work on assignments and engage in library research. The meeting day has two parts. In part one, all twenty five junior partners meet together for one half day. Responsibility for these sessions is shared by school board consultants, university staff and the Teaching Partnership Committee. Curriculum and pedagogical content are presented and discussed in these sessions. Topics include material from curriculum and instruction areas, educational foundations, developmental psychology, learning theory and educational administration. Part two or the second half of the weekly meeting day, allows in-school groups to meet in seminar format with their Teaching Partnership key contact. This person is one of the members of the Teaching Partnership Committee.

During one meeting day in each of the first three months, junior partners spend the entire day with university-school board staff. Designated topics for these sessions are: community of learners, curriculum planning, and student assessment. Certain weeks are designated as 'full school' weeks. At these times junior partners are full time in schools.

In order to facilitate breadth of experience, one week exchanges are planned. Junior partners will be able to spend some time in a partner school which is different with respect to size, location and student population. A committee member reported that the committee,

...wanted the students to be more or less attached to one teacher for the two years but we wanted to do some exchanges so there would be some time when they would be in very different schools...So

we have all kinds of schools. We have some 'die and go to heaven schools' and we have some schools where parents have good intentions but things are tough. So we have all the range. We have some really small schools and some really big schools. And so what we hope to do is give the students the experience...We hope that we will be able to build enough of a sense of connection among the eight schools that it will feel comfortable for a teacher at one to say to a teacher at another, "can we change our student teachers for a couple of weeks?"... So it became important in selecting the schools that we didn't choose all the same kind. So, the junior partners participating in the program will have a different teacher education experience from that of their university based colleagues with respect to place and schedule of work, programme emphasis and perspective and personal role and responsibilities.

Senior teachers, principals and Teaching Partnership key contacts experienced with traditional practicums, will also find themselves in unfamiliar territory. The roles and responsibilities of all partners have different emphases and priorities from the conventional supervisory relationship between university faculty, classroom teachers and students on practicum. One committee member explained that, "The traditional practicum is a time when student teachers are 'turned over' to the mentor or group of mentor teachers in the school and are given only a minimal amount of support from the faculty."

Rather than a 'turning over' of students to classroom teachers, the Teaching Partnership seeks to draw upon the expertise of three major players to create a learning environment for children. Senior teachers will continue to play a mentoring role but in a shared classroom where a junior partner and a key contact also contribute to teaching and learning. There are major implications for role definition, relationship development, planning and collaboration.

The shift from supervisor to partner has implications for the relationship key contacts have with the partner schools and staff. One key contact indicated that she will "be thinking about the teachers and principals at the schools as my colleagues more than the person in the next office" and that she will have two places of work. "I'll work at the university and I will work in one or two schools and I won't be a visitor there. I will be the resident teacher educator. It will be interesting". This member of university staff

indicated that teachers in another school based programme "started to think of themselves as teacher educators and that was a very big mind shift for them. They did think of themselves as co-operating teachers before... so we messed around with 'who are the teacher educators?'" Different roles, different responsibilities, different patterns of work.

University faculty recognise that involvement in the Teaching Partnership will be more demanding upon their time than involvement in the mainstream programme. As one member explained:

It is going to be a lot more than the equivalent of teaching one course. It has already been because it has been all this year a half day a week off campus planning but this is the direction of the future and it is really exciting to be involved in it.

THE FACULTY

The Teaching Partnership at the University of Alberta provides students, classroom teachers and university faculty with an alternative process of teacher education. Its aims are consistent with the mission of the Faculty's Department of Elementary Education. The Department seeks to prepare generalist teachers who choose to become life long learners. The Departmental statement of mission states that:

The instructional program is based on the belief that teaching proficiency is dependent upon knowledge of subject matter, pedagogy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, professional ethics, sensitivity to and respect for children and the socio-cultural context in which they live, and an understanding of school in the social/political/economic environment in which we live.

The Teaching Partnership is guided by the same set of principles as all Faculty of Education B.Ed programmes. Faculty documents outline principles related to the elementary school teacher, to the program structure of the B.Ed. and to the content of the programme. Like the B.Ed., therefore, the Teaching Partnership will include experiences with ways to structure the learning environment, ways of reorganising subject matter, a variety of teaching strategies, a variety of strategies for assessing and meeting the needs of individual children, and ways of promoting continuous professional development.

With regard to structure, the set of principles stipulates that:

- students will have sufficient content knowledge in order to meet children's needs,
- there will be a common core of required content within the Faculty,
- students will have an opportunity to focus attention on a specified area through a concentration of courses and experiences developed by the Department or through student-selected combinations approved by the Department, and
- there will be opportunities for work with children in a variety of contexts during the final two years of the program.

The Faculty believes that the successful teacher has an understanding of normal child development and of the specific learning difficulties and exceptional abilities encountered in the classroom, perceives the classroom as a place of collaborative learning, deals effectively with the individual differences of children, identifies problems within the teaching environment and develops solutions within ethical bounds, is aware of common dilemmas inherent in the reality of teaching, collaborates with others in the best interest of children, and reflects upon personal and professional growth. The future status of the Teaching Partnership is an issue to be explored during the course of the programme. The programme is viewed as an optional mode of delivery of undergraduate teacher education. It is conceptualised as a project or a piece of research that will assist in the development of knowledge and understanding about teacher education. Not seen to be necessarily generalisable to the entire student body, one member of the Committee suggested that "it may become larger than one cohort and be one option for students." Another said,

...we will all want to take a look at it. Our lives will change dramatically. Our lives and the students' lives and the schools too - will be in very different relationships. I think it should always be probably one alternative. I think we will want to see how the students feel...I also don't think it will be for all faculty. I think a lot of my colleagues will find this kind of enthusiasm for being out in schools difficult at times.

A third committee member saw the Teaching Partnership as a way of easing the fragmentation she perceives in the mainstream course. In the traditional programme, students engage in a twelve week practicum upon completion of the majority of their course work. The committee member attributed the difficulty some students have learning what is presented to them in methods courses to two contributing factors:

...they have nothing to 'hook' the learning on to and secondly, the fragmentation across the courses doesn't help them find any unifying philosophy, understanding, theory, anything that helps them get a handle on something that would guide them in teaching and learning.

THE ISSUES

A major and significant enabling condition of this initiative was the support and commitment awarded the programme by the Dean of the Faculty. The commitment was manifested through the absence of planning constraints and the involvement of the Associate Dean as the liaison between major stakeholders; that is, partner schools, Faculty and the ATA. An active supporter of the planning, the Associate Dean was strategically placed to deal with issues. Two issues which arose during planning are of note.

Representation on the Teaching Partnership Committee surfaced as an issue. Planning progressed with what the Committee regarded as legitimate representation from the professional body. The ATA representative had not been appointed to the committee in a manner consistent with ATA policy and the association felt, therefore, that it had not had input into the project planning. The issue surfaced after four months of planning meetings. During this time partner schools were chosen, teachers identified and met, curriculum decisions taken. The ATA challenged the committee membership two months prior to the commencement of the project.

The ATA was not opposed to the project in principle. A spokesperson for the association indicated that the project was seen to have merit if teachers had an opportunity to provide input. The issue was one of procedure and of teacher involvement. The association holds the position that the project must be a voluntary professional activity - involvement is not to be or become a condition of employment.

Organisational difference surfaced as another planning issue. In the process of building and

enhancing organisational culture, effort is expended to identify, explore and justify shared perspectives and positions. While it is the rare organisation which has complete agreement on goals, directions, and procedures there is often greater consensus within an organisation than between organisations. Differences are amplified when agreement across groups is sought. When organisations embark upon joint ventures, it is important for differences to be tabled and accommodated.

School boards and faculties of education have images and notions of teachers and of teaching. One organisational view of what it is to teach is not necessarily consistent with the view of another. A member of the Teaching Partnership committee indicated that,

...a lot of us (Faculty staff) share views that are a little less technical rational than Edmonton Public does so we had to come to terms with three people here who have a reflective, holistic, phenomenological view of teacher development and a school jurisdiction who is very comfortable with a competency-based approach.

Moving to some degree of shared meaning and understanding was fundamental to the development of the Teaching Partnership programme. Meeting and reconciling the organisational requirements of the faculty, the school district and the professional association was challenging. One committee member commented that, "in the end it evolves and you carve it out a week at a time".

The politics within and between the participating organisations played a role in the dynamics of development. Organisational histories, memories and personalities influenced the way that members of the organisations did or did not work together. In hindsight, the messiness of 'getting to the middle ground' may have been eased had the committee procured, in writing from the senior administrative levels, the requirements of each organisation; requirements for planning and for conducting the project.

In the execution of the Teaching Partnership, time will be an issue for the Committee.

It is going to take a minimum of a day per week of time to do this work. That is far more than what it would be to teach a section of a course which is the credit we are getting for this. That is an issue we'll have to resolve at the faculty sometime or other. It is okay to do this sort of

thing as an experiment but how do you get people to opt into doing this kind of thing when they know that they could teach a three hour seminar and spend half the time? So, there are issues like that.

THE EXPECTATIONS

The Faculty of Education members involved in the Teaching Partnership are prepared to deal with these and other issues as they arise in order to explore different ways of knowing and doing. Staff judge the opportunities for reduced fragmentation and increased collaboration and learning available in the Teaching Partnership, sufficient to offset what may become excessive demands on time and energy. Focusing on the learning, one faculty member highlighted the advantages and importance of developing knowledge about children and content through experience:

Some really need the experience of the classroom in order to link all the theory...I think it is difficult for student teachers to get it without some practice first...People who already have some familiarity with kids, what kids can do at a certain age level, some familiarity with some curriculum topics and ways you can experiment with strategies make the connections.

As for the junior partners, according to a faculty member, "I think all of them really felt that they wanted to learn to be a teacher in the best way possible - that they ought to be doing it in the schools".

The Teaching Partnership is a programme in schools, connecting theory to practice to improve knowing and doing, about better teaching and learning. It is expected that the format, content and purposes of the Teaching Partnership will enable learning in ways that are different from traditional approaches.

I think our university teaching-learning, workshop sessions, paper writing will be more powerful and personal...than what they would experience in a campus based programme. There will be more authenticity, more personal responsibility for one's own ideas, so we will be building a community of learners.

This creation of a community of learners is an expectation for the Teaching Partnership programme. Clandinin (1993, p.155) reports that in an alternative teacher education program, the

participants wanted to "explore the ways in which university teachers, student teachers, and cooperating teachers live out their lives in school". The new ways of learning, knowing and doing which employ the time and energy of educators open up alternative paths for teacher education. The work of teacher educators must be "situated in practice and with practitioners as we try to understand practice, teacher knowledge, and the ways in which teacher knowledge is constructed and expressed in practice" (Clandinin, 1993, p. 178).

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Endnote

1. I would like to thank the faculty members involved in the Teaching Partnership for openly sharing with me the details of their programme, their planning and their aspirations.