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SCHOOL UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS - WHAT DO THE SCHOOLS WANT

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ABSTRACT

The growing perception of a need for robust school university partnerships to improve the quality of teacher education, and to promote learning outcomes for school students, has been given further impetus by the Ramsey recommendations in Quality Matters (2000). This article briefly reviews the literature on both professional development schools, and recent school university partnership initiatives in Australia, and reports a survey of all state primary school principals in NSW, on their support for a broad range of school university partnership activities. The findings indicate strong and uniform support for the full range of activities including supervision and mentoring, collaborative teaching initiatives, action research, joint professional development, shared planning, and school enrichment and support.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for robust school - university partnerships continues to be a pervasive theme in the teacher education literature. Commenting on the American context, Goodlad facetiously claimed in 1994 that the advocacy of school university partnerships was *de rigueur*: not to be part of one could be dangerous to your health. The same claim is becoming increasingly relevant in Australia, as teachers and teacher educators collaborate to bridge the gap between schools and universities in the education of prospective teachers. There is

some evidence that the university dominated pre-service teacher education model is being increasingly challenged, although Smith (2000) warns against school - university partnerships being regarded as a panacea, indicating that partnerships alone should not delude teacher educators into believing that the criticisms of teacher education have been addressed.

A rather loose form of *de facto* relationship existed for years under which schools assisted teacher educators in universities in implementing the practicum component of teacher education programs. While these partnerships have produced invaluable collaboration, there have been further forays in recent years, most notably those involving joint participation in school-based research, and shared planning for, teaching of and assessment of prospective teachers.

The Ramsey review (*Quality Matters*) (2000) has arguably given further impetus to partnership initiatives in its recommendations relating to the roles of the Institute of Teachers. Partnership between schools and universities is described in the role of the Institute as fostering collaboration in the development of 'criteria, processes and procedures' for the accreditation of those schools providing professional experience for student teachers, and the definition of respective roles in the induction of teachers. Apart from these more formal, or institutionalised, recommendations, the

review is not explicit as to how schools and universities should collaborate.

Beyond officially mandated recommendations relating to the role of the Institute, there are many less formal, (though arguably as important) suggestions for partnership activities. Their success, however, depends on the willingness of schools and universities to embrace them. As the frequent claims about the distinctiveness of the two cultures (schools and universities) is rarely contested, it is almost inevitable that some partnership initiatives will not be equally attractive to both partners. This article focuses on the partnership activities that the schools would be willing to support.

2. LITERATURE

In Australia, the desirability of forming partnerships has been advocated by official reports (*Quality Matters*, 2000; ACDE, 1998; MACQT, 1998 and 1997; and National Schools Network, 1994), and by commentators/researchers (Brady, 2000; Merritt and Campbell, 1999; Bobis, 1998; Peters, 1997; Sachs, 1997; Sealey, Robson and Hutchins, 1997; and Gore, 1995).

Much of the literature relates to the operation of professional development schools in the United States where the boundaries between school and university are more fluid and not as distinct as in Australia. The more recent literature focuses on the participants in professional development schools, the dynamics of such schools and how their impact can be evaluated.

In relation to the impact of partnership activities in professional development schools on participants, there are studies on principals (Foster, Loving and Shumate, 2000); school teachers, particularly those focusing on leadership and empowerment (Gonzales and Lambert, 2001; Lecos, Cassella, Evans, Leahy, Liess and Lucas, 2000; Walling and Lewis, 2000); pre-service teachers (Burley, Yearwood, Elwood-Salinas, Martin and Allen, 2001);

school students (Sandholtz and Dadlez, 2000); and university staff (Tom, 1999). This last article is particularly salutary for university teacher educators as it examines the destabilising effects of partnership initiatives on university staff, suggesting that such destabilisation can assist staff in reconsidering their professional roles.

The research into the operation of professional development schools is often investigated in terms of the dynamics of collaboration (Himel, Hall, Henderson and Floyd, 2000; Schack, 1999; and Walker, 1999), or more generally in terms of partnership development. El-Amin, Cristol and Hammond (1999) describe the process of developing a professional development school as analogous to that of building a house. The title of Teitel's (1998) article, involving the metaphors of separation, divorce and open marriage, denote what follows: an account of partnerships that break down and reconfigure to include new partners.

Other professional development school literature is concerned with the question of evaluation, both in terms of the impact on teachers and lecturers, but, perhaps more importantly, on student learning (Knight, Wiseman and Cooner, 2000); and in terms of the need for 'credible, systematic documentation of professional development school impacts' (Teitel, 2001). This area of the literature is critical to more fully understanding how professional development school and partnership research in general can be conceptualised.

Apart from school support of university teacher education practicum initiatives, perhaps the most enduring partnership expression in Australia since the mid 1990s has been the Innovative Links Project initiated by the National Schools Network. This project focused on shared research, in which teacher inquiry provided teachers with a critical orientation to their practice, and demonstrated that they could conduct research in their schools that led to

meaningful change and enhanced teacher professionalism (see Sachs, 1997; Yeatman, 1996). The work of Johnson, Johnson, Le-Cornu, Mader and Peters (1999) and Peters (1997) built on the success of the Innovative Links Project in developing a collaborative initiative between the University of South Australia and the Department of Education, Training and Employment, in which schools work with university staff to support school based action research.

There have also been a variety of more specific partnership initiatives. These include the shared teaching initiatives reported by Sealey, Robson and Hutchins (1997), by which the staff of Deakin University collaborated with primary teachers in teaching a third-year subject on curriculum development and implementation; the partnership developed by the Victoria University of Technology which changed the course structure, the work of lecturers and the learning experiences of teacher education students (Kruger, Cherednichenko and Hooley, 2001); the work reported by Merritt and Campbell (1999) in developing a partnership between Kurri Kurri High School and the University of Sydney; the ongoing partnerships at the University of Western Sydney (MacArthur) involving in-school experiences, teachers as tutors, teachers as students and joint research projects (Woodward and Sinclair-Gaffey, 1995); and the collaboration between Waitara Public School and the University of Technology Sydney (Brady, 2000).

Schools are rarely perceived by educators as 'islands.' They are learning communities, and as such may benefit from external collaboration that assists teachers to improve their practice. There are other sources for partnership beyond the university. Lieberman (2000) argues the value of networks, or less formal partnerships, that are characterised by commitment to an idea, a sense of shared purpose, a mixture of information sharing and psychological support, and an

egalitarian ethos. However, a formally constituted partnership with a shared purpose and clearly defined roles and expectations potentially optimises the education of prospective teachers, promotes learning outcomes for school students and enhances the professional development of school and university staff.

3. METHOD

A survey was used to determine principal's responses to 25 different partnership activities between schools and universities. The items were grouped into six broad sections: supervision and mentoring; teaching initiatives; research; professional development; shared planning; and school enrichment and support.

A five-point Likert scale, with bi-polar verbal designations (full support, no support) enabled determination of degree of support. Information was also sought on four possible predictors: age and gender of respondent; school type (in NSW, primary schools are classified as 'P1' to 'P6', according to the size of student enrolment); and distance from a university. Age, gender and school type have been significant predictors in the survey research of Brady (2000a, 1997) on the implementation of several DET (NSW) initiatives; and it was thought that distance from a university, and therefore the variable likelihood of a viable partnership, might also be a significant factor.

Personnel in the Training and Development Directorate (NSW Department of Education and Training) checked the survey for construct and content validity, and a small pilot followed.

The choice of principals rather than teachers as respondents was based on several considerations: the principal's power in determining and implementing policy, the greater knowledge of the principal about partnership activities, and the influence of the principal as transformational leader, in changing the culture of the school. Since 1955,

Goodlad's claim that 'as the principal, so goes the school' has become an aphorism.

Collaboration with the NSW Primary Principals Association (PPA) enabled the survey to be sent by e-mail to all 1,800 State primary school principals. The survey was conducted in November 2001. Although the response rate was a little under 50 percent, it was considered appropriate, as the sample comprised the total population of primary principals, and there were large numbers in all the identifying cells for the predictor variables. Such a response rate may not have been deemed appropriate if the sample had been random.

Data were analysed using SPSS to determine both item means and the relationship between the items and the four predictor variables of age, gender, school type and distance from a university.

4. FINDINGS

There was uniformly strong support for school university partnership initiatives

When means were determined for the 25 items, from 'full support' (m=1.0) to 'no support' (m=5.0), they ranged from 1.3 to 2.2. Numerous respondents gave a rating of 1 (full support) for all 25 items. In the broad sections previously identified, a sequence of most to least support was identified: school enrichment and support, professional development, shared teaching initiatives, and research. It was impossible to rank the other two categories as they comprised a range of means.

The high support for school enrichment and support was not surprising, particularly given the examples provided, viz student teachers performing drama for school students, and helping at swimming carnivals. These activities benefit the school and are not invasive. The relatively low ratings for the two items relating to research in schools (two of the five lowest rating survey items) are arguably an expression of invasiveness. Unsolicited

comment in the survey relating to research, revealed a concern about the relevance of lecturer research for the schools. However, the relatively low rating for 'school teachers and lecturers conducting shared research' are surprising in the light of the benefits to schools deriving from partnership research initiatives like those with UTS, UWS, and Sydney University. While such a result may underline the need for a fuller resurrection of innovative links projects, it needs to be restated that means for all items indicated support.

Though unsolicited comment may not be representative, there was much written support for partnership activities: 'I can only applaud the above philosophy'; 'great stuff'; 'this sounds wonderful'; 'when can we start'; 'I would love to be involved in any such activities which boost the professionalism of our teachers'. The following more fully addresses teacher education:

□ I believe that the sooner teachers can become involved in, committed to and aware of the total school/teaching environment the better. Teachers seem best placed to support the in-school training of their colleagues. The more collegiality, shared responsibility and practical support teachers, lecturers, schools and universities can provide the better.

Other responses focused on the practical difficulties. The following was typical:

□ Unless there is a considerable change in the work commitments of both teachers and university lecturers, we are left with an unattainable ideal. It would be great to have greater interaction between schools and universities but we can't do the things we want to do now. While I am sure that most schools would give in principle support for such an interaction, the practical difficulties are immense.

□ *There was strong support for 'traditional' partnership activities*

While there was strong support for student teachers providing school support (for example, helping at swimming carnivals), there was also strong support for the school's traditional role in supervising students on practicum. This support applied equally to supervising student teachers on conventional practices ($m=1.33$) and for supervising them as apprentices in their final year ($m=1.37$). The supervision of student teachers for an extended practicum in their fourth and final year has become as much a part of the school culture as shorter block and day release supervision.

A gratifying expression of school professionalism was the high support for teachers working with teacher educators in developing teacher education programs ($m=1.37$). One typical practice in developing new subjects for teacher education programs has been to seek the approval of practising teachers, but such a practice has usually fallen well short of collaborative planning. It is interesting to note, however, that the converse (lecturers working with teachers in planning school teaching) was relatively low rated. Such a finding would seem to refute the notion that the highest support might be a reflection of what the school can directly gain from partnership. It may though be a reflection of what the school believes to be 'teachers' work'.

□ *There was relatively less support for joint appointments, mentoring of school students and research*

The relatively low ratings for joint appointments (school teacher and teacher educator) (2.11) and student teacher mentoring of school students (2.02) arguably raises methodological concerns, i.e. those related to how much information a survey can provide without becoming unwieldy. Joint appointments of lecturers and school teachers have been trialled in NSW, but respondents may well have needed more operational detail. Conversely

the item may have been clearly understood and not strongly supported.

Similarly, the mentoring of school students by teacher education students may have required further explanation. At Waitara Public School, student teachers visit the school for ten consecutive weeks, and work on a one-to-one basis with students who are identified as being challenged in the number strand of mathematics. Brady (2000b) identifies this partnership activity as one of the most mutually-beneficial to both partners: it provides teacher education students with teaching practice; it frees the teacher from some responsibility in individualising teaching; and it improves the learning outcomes of school students. The relatively low rating for the item is therefore surprising.

The relatively low ratings for research in partnership have already been discussed. The following unsolicited comment is a response with which teacher educators may not be unfamiliar: 'Research can sometimes be a pain. Often the topic is something not needed by the school.'

Of course such criticism is not valid of action research that is initiated, driven and 'owned' by the school.

□ *There were no significant differences according to the age of respondent, school type or its distance from a university*

Previous studies by Brady (2000, 1997) that revealed significant differences for age, teaching experience and school type are different from the current study in two main ways: they comprise perceptions of real, mandated practice as opposed to perceptions of an ideal that is not as yet achievable; and the respondents were teachers rather than principals. It may seem surprising that there were no differences in the views of principals from schools as different as P1, P6 and special schools; and no differences according to whether the

school was less than ten or more than 200 kilometres from a university.

- *There were differences by gender with female principals indicating more support for some induction/supervision and planning/teaching initiatives*

Female principals indicated more support for the five survey items that revealed a difference by gender. These items included the induction/supervision items 'school teachers working with lecturers inducting new school teachers'; 'supervising student teachers for professional experience'; 'supervising student teachers as apprentices in their final year'; and the planning/teaching items 'working with lecturers in developing teacher education courses' and 'working with lecturers in teaching and assessing teacher education courses'.

No explanation is provided for these differences.

5. CONCLUSION

There is a growing perception of the need for partnerships to promote learning at all levels, whether they are formally constituted or looser affiliations like those identified by Lieberman (2000). Such a perception derives from the recognition that the collaboration between stakeholders potentially optimises learning. The recommendations in the Ramsey review (2000) further promoted discussion of the desirability of partnerships.

This study revealed uniformly strong support for a great variety of partnership initiatives between schools and universities in the promotion of student teacher learning, school student learning, and the professional development of lecturers and teachers. Support was strong for supervision and mentoring, collaborative teaching initiatives, shared research, professional development, joint planning, and school enrichment/support. Evidence indicates that the schools are ready to embrace partnership initiatives beyond that

of the traditional practicum supervision model.

The survey preamble to the 25 items asks principals to indicate support for the listed partnership activities 'given an ideal resourcing base'. This requirement of responding to the ideal rather than the real naturally provoked some unsolicited comment. While the partnership ideas generated excitement, some principals were concerned about the problems of developing such initiatives: 'What support would you give assuming an ideal resourcing base?' one principal queried. 'This is the key. (We're) tired of being expected to do more with less. Teachers are currently overwhelmed with the expectations of their role. It would be very difficult to implement this new strategy without adequate time and reward-based strategies.' Given the current structures in schools and universities, some university lecturers, working to promote partnerships, experience the same frustration.

However, the real significance of the study's findings is the overwhelming willingness of principals to embrace a broad range of partnership activities which are not an integral part of current practice, and which, if developed, will have significant implications for changing the nature of schooling and teacher education.

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