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Sustaining School Colleagues' Commitment to a Long-term Professional Experience Partnership

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from a qualitative study that investigated school participants' perceptions of the benefits, challenges and supportive factors related to their involvement in a long-term school/university professional experience partnership. Data were collected through interviews with coordinators and a written survey completed by mentor teachers from 4 schools. The findings indicate that participants perceived the program to have a number of benefits for both staff and school students and that participation was supported by effective communication, flexible funding arrangements, local autonomy to interpret and adapt the program and the continuity arising from the long-term nature of the partnership. The benefits and supportive factors appear to have compensated for challenges such as organisational demands, negotiating university expectations and stresses on workload, time, space and resources. The discussion focuses on features that appear to have contributed to the sustainability of the partnership over many years.

Introduction

Studies of pre-service teachers, beginning teachers and stake-holders consistently find that experience in schools is considered to be a critical aspect of pre-service teachers' learning (e.g. Le Cornu, 2010; Peters & Le Cornu, 2006). As a result, policies in Australia and overseas consistently endorse the role of professional experience in teacher education. For instance, in Australia the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee and Vocational Training (2007) found that professional experience is 'a critically important part of teacher education courses and is consistently valued highly by student teachers' (p. xxv). Benefits cited in the report include the opportunities for pre-service teachers to integrate 'theoretical knowledge and professional practice' and have diverse experiences in 'a range of school contexts and with a variety of students' under the guidance of experienced and expert practitioners (pp. 73-74).

The benefits and challenges of professional experience for pre-service teachers have been the subject of many studies (e.g. Peters, 2009, 2010; Haigh & Ward, 2003) but it is also important to consider the impact of professional experience on school colleagues such as coordinators and mentor teachers (Hastings, 2004; Le Cornu, 2010). Universities depend on the goodwill of school-based colleagues to find professional experience placements for pre-service teachers but it is becoming increasingly difficult in Australia and overseas to find sufficient places (Bloomfield, 2009; Walkington, 2007). Bloomfield (2009) attributed this difficulty to increased pressures on schools from higher numbers of professional experience days and levels

of enrolment in teacher education, while Walkington (2007) blamed 'the ineffectual nature of the relationships between schools and universities' (p. 292) and school colleagues' 'frustration at the lack of acknowledgement for efforts through time allowance, rewards or other incentives' (p. 281).

School/university partnership approaches to professional experience have long been seen as one way to develop closer relationships between pre-service teachers, teachers and lecturers for the purpose of facilitating the pre-service teachers' learning (Smedley, 2001, p. 190). Sixteen years ago Dawson (1995) noted that 'the creation and development of collaborative and cooperative relationships between universities and school authorities concerns teacher education institutions throughout North America, Europe and Australia' (p. 174). Since then, in Australia and elsewhere there has been a growing emphasis on teacher educators working in partnership with schools to construct professional experiences that maximise pre-service teacher engagement and learning (House of Representatives Standing Committee and Vocational Training, 2007).

Although the literature provides many insights about the interpretations, benefits, outcomes, challenges and support of school/university partnerships (see for example Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell & Cherednichenko, 2009; Edwards & Mutton, 2007; Peters, 2002), there is general agreement that there are many questions that need to be pursued further through research. Aspects where current knowledge and understandings have been perceived to be inadequate include:

- participants' motivation for becoming involved in partnerships (Scott & Burke, 1995; Sinclair, Munns & Woodward, 2006);
- the impact of partnerships on participants' learning and practice (Whitford & Metcalf-Turner, 1999, Le Cornu, 2010);
- the processes for negotiating democratic, equitable, mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships between teachers and tertiary teacher educators (Smedley, 2001; Bloomfield, 2009);
- the circumstances, factors or conditions that facilitate partnerships (Peters, 2002; Scott & Burke, 1995); and
- the cultural and structural impediments to partnerships (Peters, 2002; Smedley, 2001).

Clearly it is important for teacher educators to become more aware of school colleagues' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of participation in professional experience partnerships so they can address concerns, optimise potential benefits and provide them with appropriate support to meet any challenges (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). The study reported in this paper provides useful insights from a long-term professional experience partnership that are intended to support the development of better partnerships in the future.

Background

I coordinate the first year professional experience course for junior primary/primary pre-service teachers in the four-year undergraduate degree at the University of South Australia. Two stages of professional experience are completed as part of the first year course. Stage 1 comprises an introduction to teaching and the profession over five consecutive Thursdays. Stage 2 comprises a seven-day professional experience in a different school (with a country placement as an option). This study focused on Stage 1 in 2010.

For nearly two decades a small number of primary schools (years R-7) have been involved in a school/university partnership approach to professional experience in the Stage 1 Program. One day a week for five consecutive weeks in August/September each school in the program provides a highly supportive and structured introduction for up to thirty pre-service teachers (per school). One or two people in each school take responsibility for coordinating the program. Most other teachers in the schools are involved in the program as mentor teachers who host the pre-service teachers in classrooms and/or contribute to other program activities.

In 2010 five schools worked in the Stage 1 Program and accommodated 145 first year pre-service teachers. These same five schools have been involved in the program for many years (periods ranging from 7-19 years), with two of them having been involved since the program was initiated in 1991. Over the five days of the Stage 1 Program the schools ran special activities around the five themes of:

- an introduction to the school;
- learning is an active process;
- self esteem influences learning;
- language is basic to learning; and
- resources, organisation and management.

The programs featured input from staff members to the whole group of pre-service teachers about the theme for the day, modelled lessons illustrating the theme in action and placement of pairs or small groups of pre-service teachers in home classes for observation of mentor teachers and teaching of prepared lessons to small groups of children. University lectures and workshops over those weeks focussed on the same themes and provided the opportunity for pre-service teachers to debrief, share and develop their learning from each school visit.

In earlier studies (see Peters 2009 and 2010) I focussed on the pre-service teachers' perceptions of this program and found them to be highly positive in terms of their increased confidence, the kinds of support they received and their learning about aspects such as planning and teaching, classroom management, students' diverse needs and the role of relationships. To complete the picture of the extent to which this program is supportive for all those involved, I felt it was important to also find out about the school participants' perceptions through a more rigorous approach than the informal feedback they had provided over the years.

Methodology

The aim of this research project was to identify school participants' perceptions of the benefits, challenges and supportive factors arising from their involvement in the Stage 1 Program. The research questions were:

- What are the benefits and challenges for school participants involved in a school/university partnership approach to professional experience in a first year teacher education course?
- What supports and sustains the work of mentor teachers and school program coordinators?

Although all five schools were keen to be involved in the study, one school was forced to withdraw when the coordinator unexpectedly needed to take long term leave. Participants from the other four schools were five coordinators of the Stage 1 Program (there were two co-coordinators at one of the schools) and 23 mentor teachers (MTs) involved in the program. Coordinators participated in an individual semi-structured

interview (Fontana & Frey, 2000) of approximately 30 minutes in length. Questions addressed their roles as coordinators of the program, reasons for the schools' involvement, preferred aspects, benefits and challenges of the program, helpful and hindering factors and suggestions for improvement and further support from the University.

A brief written survey was distributed to the MTs. The survey asked them to rate the professional experience program on a 3-point Likert scale from 'not very beneficial' to 'very beneficial', and to respond to open-ended questions about their reasons for involvement, the benefits for members of the school community, the challenges of involvement and suggestions for improvement and further support from the University. Surveys were distributed to 54 MTs and 23 were completed and returned (roughly 43%). It was not anticipated that the return rate for surveys would be high given the busy life of teachers and that survey distribution and return were managed at a distance through the program coordinator in each school.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992) and Hargreaves (1994) lamented the absence of teachers' voices from much research about partnership. To address this absence, this research was based largely on qualitative data intended to provide a 'holistic picture, formed with words' (Creswell, 1994, p.2). The qualitative data comprised participants' responses to the open ended questions in the questionnaire and interviews. In accordance with Bernard's (2000) 'mechanics of grounded theory', the transcripts of the coordinators' interview responses and mentor teachers' written responses to the open-ended survey questions were coded and categorised. As categories were developed they were reviewed to identify similarities, differences and other patterns that linked them (p. 443). The themes identified through this process form the basis of the findings reported in this paper. In addition, a very small quantitative element comprised the frequencies calculated for mentor teachers' responses on the questionnaire to the first Likert scale question. Neumann (1997) argued that quantitative data can supplement or complement qualitative data, providing a form of triangulation.

School Colleagues' Perceptions of their Involvement in the Stage 1 Professional Experience Partnership

Analysis of the interview and survey responses provided insights about school-based participants' reasons for involvement in the first year program, the benefits and challenges arising from their involvement and supportive factors.

Reasons for Involvement

Coordinators had either inherited coordination of the Stage 1 Program as part of their role as Professional Experience Coordinator for their schools or they were enthusiastic classroom teachers who had volunteered to take it on. However, even for those in the former position it was clear that they had an interest in and commitment to the program that went beyond an expected duty. In particular, they expressed a strong commitment to wanting to contribute to the future of the profession:

(I'm) very keen to support future teachers... knowing the amount of support I got coming through as a student teacher myself and ...I wanted to be able to hopefully instil some of the

positivity and the enthusiasm for teaching and my little knowledge that I have. (C4)

In three of the schools MTs volunteered to be involved, while in the fourth school all teachers were expected to participate. However, where MTs volunteered it was clear that the coordinators played a strong role in encouraging them to do so. One explained it in this way, 'You give people that you know have got great strengths an opportunity to shine and to share and ...I know them well enough and have a relationship that I can ... talk them into having a go at doing it' (C3). Many MTs echoed the coordinators' sentiments about their reasons for involvement making comments such as 'promoting it as a career for the future of our children' (MT13) and 'students need to experience classrooms so teachers need to be involved – otherwise where will the new teachers come from?' (MT6). Other reasons for involvement included '(because) the school is involved' (MT21), curiosity about 'what it would be like' (MT16) and wanting to 'keep up with what is happening at Uni X' (MT2).

The Benefits of Participation

MTs' survey responses indicated that nearly all teachers felt that their involvement in the program was 'very beneficial' (29%) or 'beneficial' (67%). Only one response (4%) rated it as 'not very beneficial'. The coordinators, too, cited a number of benefits with the most common themes across all participants being opportunities through the program for: 1) interaction with and development of pre-service teachers; 2) sharing ideas and show-casing practice; 3) reflection and professional development; and 4) classroom and student support.

Interaction with and Development of Pre-service Teachers

As part of their commitment to developing the profession, most participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to spend time with first year pre-service teachers. Coordinators and MTs commented on the pleasure of being 'surrounded by youthful and enthusiastic students' (MT17). It was clear that they saw the goal of their interactions with pre-service teachers as helping them to develop as teachers and that they took pleasure when they could see that development had occurred. One coordinator noted that she could 'actually see some development even though it's a short space of time' (C1) while an MT commented, 'I value the opportunity to support and work alongside the students in this journey' (MT20).

Sharing Ideas and Show-casing Practice

A strong focus in the program is structured input and modelling by school participants related to the five designated themes that also drive the parallel on-campus program. A dominant theme in participants' responses was that many relished these opportunities to share their expertise with pre-service teachers. MTs commented on the satisfaction of sharing 'skills and enthusiasm as a teacher' (MT13) and the importance of passing on 'practical classroom methods that are not found in theory lessons' (MT11). Coordinators explained that key parts of their role were identifying, recruiting and supporting MTs who had particular expertise around the themes to participate in particular introductory sessions and modelled lessons. One explained

that it was not uncommon for MTs to feel apprehensive about taking on the new role of lecturer and model for adults, so it was important to provide moral support. One way she did this was to write them appreciative notes about their work in the program (C3).

Another coordinator commented on the positive reinforcement MTs often received from pre-service teachers when they found what they observed to be congruent with their university studies (C4), while one MT noted that listening to pre-service teacher feedback on her lessons 'brought the outcomes that I had hoped to achieve into sharp focus when the pre-service teachers could comment on what they saw as achieved or not' (MT18). It was clear that involvement in the program enhanced some MTs' feelings of professional self worth with one making the comment: 'I also gained a lot more confidence in myself and feel I can contribute skills and knowledge' (MT1).

Reflection and Professional Development

All of the coordinators and many of the MTs responded that one of the greatest benefits of their involvement was the way it promoted their own reflection and professional development. Coordinators clearly saw this as one of the more important reasons for ongoing involvement with the program with one explaining, 'It actually forces us to focus on some of those aspects of learning that we're talking to the students about' (C5). Another felt that the program linked well with performance management as a highly supportive mechanism for teacher development because it gave MTs a chance 'to articulate their methodology'. He added that having been involved in the program for nearly twenty years at three different schools, and having gone on to hold a series of leadership positions, he believed that his participation as a young teacher in different aspects of the program 'might have formed why I am what I am now' (C2).

A number of MTs mentioned that working with the pre-service teachers provided the opportunity to 'reflect on your own practice' (MT16). Others commented on benefits such as the 'opportunity to refine our skills as you do when the others are watching' (MT23) and providing 'an opportunity for me to analyse my practice and break it down for 1st years to understand' (MT22).

It was clear that for some, gaining a greater understanding of the University's approach to teacher education was an aspect of their development. One coordinator commented: 'You get new learning yourself and keep up to date with what's going on in teacher education, which I think is important for us' (C1). Another reported that she valued the invitation to attend one of the early on-campus lectures to hear the program introduced and meet her group of students (C4). One of the coordinators agreed:

Classroom and Student Support

As part of the program pairs or small groups of pre-service teachers spent part of each day observing, helping and working with small groups of children in home classes. MTs appreciated that there were some purely practical benefits arising from 'having 2 extra pair of hands for some things' (MT22). They also felt that there were a range of benefits in terms of support for their students such as the students enjoying 'having the pre-service teachers in the room as it gives them the chance to work with

other adults' (MT9). Another stated that in a school largely staffed by mature teachers it was a benefit 'having younger teachers at school to interact with students' (MT2).

All of the coordinators were strongly of the view that the program was beneficial to the students. One cited the evidence that on the days when the pre-service teachers visited the school, the statistics around managing student behaviour were 'our lowest stats (sic) for the year'. He attributed the improvement to the fact that 'teachers are better prepared because they know that there are PAR 1 teachers coming in' (C2).

Challenges and Hindrances

As would be expected, the participants reported that there were some challenges and hindrances in hosting up to 30 pre-service teachers for whole day visits. The main themes discerned related to organisation, clarity of university expectations and issues around workload, time, space and resources.

Organisation

The onus for organising the program largely fell to the coordinators, although MTs also had to organise their own participation in input sessions and modelled lessons, as well as accommodating pairs or small groups of PTs in their classrooms and teaching programs. All coordinators talked about the organisation involved in managing the program. Aspects mentioned included planning the various aspects of the program and recruiting staff to participate, communicating with them about the structure and expectations, allocating PTs to classrooms and preparing materials for the various sessions.

MTs faced different organisational challenges. For instance one reported that having the pre-service teachers 'slightly throws out class routines' in her reception class (MT19), while another spoke of 'juggling the work that is a requirement at the time and the activities the students need to do for their university studies'. She was able to resolve this challenge by encouraging 'the uni (sic) students to do activities which fit into...our units of inquiry so that they are more relevant to the class.' (MT24).

Clarity of University Expectations

A further challenge related to the need for clarity around the university expectations for the professional experience. Although the program is structured around five themes so as to be congruent with the on-campus program, schools have a great deal of flexibility in how they interpret the themes and structure the days. However, it was clear that both coordinators and MTs were very keen to make sure their program met the university expectations and pre-service teachers' needs. Several coordinators indicated that although they appreciated the freedom to interpret the program this was sometimes a cause for concern in terms of whether they were 'actually meeting the needs of what you're expecting and what the student teachers are expecting' (C5). Some MTs also indicated they needed greater clarity around aspects such as 'greater awareness of topics students are taught' (MT 23) and 'a bit more information on what theories/teaching methods that have been introduced at Uni (sic) at the start of the year (to have an idea of what prior knowledge they are bringing with them)' (MT 14).

Some also felt that the university communication with pre-service teachers about expectations needed to be clearer.

Issues Around Workload, Time, Space and Resources

As would be expected, working with such a large group of pre-service teachers placed pressure on coordinators and MTs related to their workloads, available time and use of space. Although the university provided some funding for release time for coordinators, the money often went into general school funds leaving them to find the time to organise and oversee the program as part of their normal workload.

Available time and workload also influenced whether teachers volunteered to participate: 'Those people who don't want to be involved, it's usually around either personal reasons or workload' (C3). A number of MTs commented on the difficulty of finding time with their pre-service teachers 'to sit down and debrief and guide in the preparation of next week's task at the end of the day' (MT3). The goodwill of school leaders was evident in some of the schools, where members of the leadership team took MTs' classes so they could contribute to input sessions with the whole group.

Clearly adding thirty extra adults to any school added a pressure on available space and resources and several participants made comments to that effect such as: 'There was a large number of extra adults to share staffroom, toilets, photocopier etc.' (MT 4).

Supportive Factors

In identifying supportive factors the participants made comments related to the themes of effective communication, flexible funding, local autonomy and the continuity arising from the long-term nature of the partnership.

Effective Communication

In the main, participants felt well supported by the communication they received about the program. For coordinators, this was mainly about the communication they had from the university coordinator in the form of written materials about the program, phone-calls and emails. MTs also receive written communication from the University in the form of detailed written materials about the program but it was clear the coordinators played a large role in the day-to-day communication which kept the program running smoothly:

And then it's just following through making sure that everybody's got their class allocations and the teachers have got what they need and they know what's going on, that they get their reports and that everyone's filled all that in and following that through so it's about being organised enough, week by week about what happens. (C3)

They also saw it as important to be accessible to the pre-service teachers should any issues arise over the five days.

MTs on the whole seemed to be happy with the level of communication from the university and coordinators, as can be seen in comments such as, 'plenty of support given.' (MT2) and 'I thought it was well organised/run' (MT 3), but some wanted

shorter and clearer written communication such as ‘an email sent out to participating mentor teachers just to out-line what the PAR 1 students will be undertaking in the placement’ (MT19).

Local Autonomy

When the Stage 1 Program began nearly two decades ago the University provided each school with a university mentor who performed the planning and oversight role that is now undertaken by the school coordinators. The program was tightly structured and schools were expected to implement it in similar ways. Over time, as some schools left the program and others joined, these arrangements altered and schools were given the choice of whether they had a university mentor to take the coordination role, or received funding for someone on the staff to take the role. For a number of years all schools have opted for the latter. In recent years schools have also been able to interpret the program and structure the five days in ways that best suit their contexts. It was clear that coordinators felt that these arrangements were supportive of their participation. They all agreed that it was important for someone who knew the staff well to recruit MTs to the program. For instance, one explained:

This year I looked at who had a strength in literacy and I chose the younger person ...who has been teaching for maybe six or seven years. She has a passion for literacy, she has a passion for ICT, she married them both together. (C3)

It was also clear that coordinators used the freedom to interpret guide-lines flexibly to identify and respond to the pre-service teachers’ interests and needs and highlight local strengths. One explained how she interpreted the University guidelines so as to highlight school foci each year (C3), while another used a PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting) evaluation process to collect information from pre-service teachers half way through the professional experience and De Bono’s ‘Thinking Hats’ on the final day. She used the feedback to adapt the program both while it was happening and for the following year (C4).

Flexible Funding Arrangements

MTs in Australia receive a daily allowance from the university for their work with pre-service teachers. Schools in the Stage 1 Program receive additional funding in the form of an amount to release the coordinator for three and a half days (a half day for each day of the program plus an extra day for planning and organisation). They also have the option of claiming the individual teacher payments for supervision as a lump sum paid to the school as long as the participating teachers agree. These two amounts mean schools can receive an attractive amount of money for running the program which can be used for specific purposes. For instance, one MT explained that ‘the money is pooled and we buy luxuries for our staffroom’ (MT21).

In schools where coordinators were part of the leadership team, the money for their release went into general funds. Even though this meant they completed the work around the program on top of their normal workload, they were happy to see the benefits the funds brought to the wider staff. One explained, ‘We see that as a bonus to be able to give back to the teachers’ (C3).

Continuity

All of the schools studied had participated in the program for many years and the continuity provided by the opportunity to engage over the long term was clearly a supportive factor. Having found participation rewarding, MTs were more likely to engage again the following year, as can be seen in comments such as: 'Have participated in the program for 8 years and have enjoyed inspiring new teachers to continue on' (MT10). This made life easier for the coordinators in recruiting MTs because they were 'more happy to do it again once they'd done it' (C4). Even though some of the coordinators had inherited the job when they became the school's Professional Experience Coordinator, the transition was made easier because the program had already been operating for several years.

Discussion

This study found that school participants in a long-term university/school partnership approach to professional experience were keen to contribute to the future of the teaching profession and considered the benefits and supportive factors arising from their involvement to be compensation for any challenges. From these findings it is possible to discern a number of features of this particular approach to partnership that appear to account for the sustained commitment and participation of school-based participants. These are:

- structured and supported opportunities to show-case expertise;
- a coordinated school-wide approach;
- a balance between clear guidance and local autonomy;
- reciprocal benefits; and
- continuity over an extended period of time.

What follows is a discussion of each of these factors and the ways they connect to insights from the current literature.

Structured and Supported Opportunities to Show-case Expertise

To some extent all professional experiences are framed around the premise that pre-service teachers will benefit from having access to the expertise and practices of the mentor teachers with whom they work (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). In many professional experience programs this access is left to chance, with pre-service teachers working exclusively with randomly assigned mentor teachers who may or may not see their role as explicitly explaining and modelling best practice (Wasley, 2002, Hudson, 2010). Fieman Nemser (2001) suggested mentor teachers may even 'withhold assistance due to the enduring belief that teaching is a highly personalized practice of finding one's own style' (p. 1033). Furthermore, Sinclair *et al.* (2005) summarised studies that revealed that mentor teachers often deliberately countered university notions of 'best practice' by telling pre-service teachers to 'forget about what is taught to them in the university' (p. 210).

Clearly it is in the interest of pre-service teachers for teacher educators to work closely with schools to ensure consistent messages about best practice are conveyed. Fifteen years ago the Standards Council of the Teaching Profession (1996) recommended partnerships focussed 'on school practitioners sharing and trialling the

delivery of best classroom practices' (p. 51). The partnership in this study was in line with this recommendation in that it was based on the development and implementation of a school-wide program designed to be congruent with the 'best practice' themes that informed the on-campus program. It is clear from the findings of this study that mentor teachers responded well to the explicit structuring of opportunities for them to contribute through input sessions and modelled lessons. Although often needing some encouragement and support to do so, they clearly found it rewarding to participate in this way and to receive positive feedback about their teaching from the pre-service teachers and school program coordinators.

A Coordinated School-wide Approach

The term 'learning communities' has been used in the teacher development literature to describe a positive and enabling context for teachers' professional growth where the professional learning of teachers is shared and problematised (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). As schools focus more on developing as learning communities there is greater emphasis in teacher education on clustering pre-service teachers in schools and providing them with school-wide rather than single classroom professional experiences (Le Cornu, 2010). Bullough Jr (2005, p. 153) identified the emotional and 'relational' nature of being a mentor teacher, where mentors can feel vulnerable in opening their classrooms to others. Le Cornu (2010) found that school-wide approaches to professional experience provide all participants with needed support.

School leaders have been shown to be central to the development of schools as learning communities (Wood, 2005). This study found that the support of school leaders, and in particular that of the school program coordinators, was central to providing a supportive culture in each of the schools. According to Martinez & Coombs (2001) the important role of school coordination in professional experience has long been over-looked in research. In a study of 10 coordinators they found that 'the role of the coordinator extends beyond the administrative function, and is crucial in establishing the practicum as an occasion for quality learning' (p. 275-276). This was certainly the case for the coordinators in this study. In addition to organising the program, communicating with all participants and carefully negotiating for teachers to showcase their strengths, they adapted the program to suit the local context, highlight school foci and respond to the pre-service teachers' needs. Like the coordinators in Martinez and Coombs' (2001) study they helped 'shape the professional ethos of a school, as experienced by pre-service teachers' (p. 276).

A Balance Between Clear Guidance and Local Autonomy

There is often tension in partnerships if one partner tries to impose rigid expectations on the other (Smedley, 2001). The term 'parity of esteem' was used by Grundy (1996, p. 11) to describe the kind of mutual respect for expertise that should be established in partnerships. She stressed that recognition of the different interests and expertise of the partners 'should add breadth and depth' to collaborative endeavours. Although partners need to share some common goals, there also needs to be room for partners to be able to negotiate expectations in ways that recognise and serve their individual strengths and needs. Kruger *et al.* (2009) recently studied 35 Australian school/university partnerships in the area of teacher education. They found that

‘reciprocity’, whereby ‘each stakeholder recognises and values what others bring to the partnership’, was an important characteristic for success (p.10). Walkington (2007) agreed, recommending partnerships in which ‘teachers’ contribution is sought and valued to enhance pre-service teacher learning in their context rather than being the recipient of a program from the university’ (p. 29).

This study revealed that school-based participants and the University shared the common goal of developing the teachers of the future. School colleagues appreciated guidance and clear communication from the University about how they might support the on-campus program in achieving this goal. At the same time they valued the opportunities to interpret the guide-lines and allocate funding in locally appropriate ways. This finding is congruent with that of Edwards and Mutton (2007) in their study of UK professional experience partnerships. They found that much of the strain caused by the time and administrative resources required to make the partnerships work effectively, was alleviated in schools that ‘developed their own core courses which were designed to meet the needs of ‘their’ students (pre-service teachers)’ (p. 511). They also raised the issue that local autonomy can lead to a lack of consistency in the programs offered to pre-service teachers by different schools and recommended that this could be addressed through greater networking across participating schools.

Reciprocal Benefits

There has been a tendency for school participants to ‘see their work in pre-service teacher education as a ‘favour’ to the university’ (Martinez & Coombs, 2001, p.286). Bloomfield (2009, p. 27) identified ‘the incorporation of appropriate systems of acknowledgment, benefit and reward’ as a particular challenge for universities seeking schools colleagues’ support for professional experience. Only in recent years have researchers begun to identify the rewards that can accrue from mentoring work. Walkington (2007) provided an extensive list of potential benefits for mentor teachers of pre-service teachers:

At the one-to-one level, mentoring teachers share their knowledge developing respect for their years of experience; they evaluate their own practices through reflection about teaching with their mentee; they are exposed to varying perspectives developed by the pre-service teachers through their university study; they have an opportunity to see their classes and pupils through a different set of eyes. In addition, having another ‘teacher in the classroom’ can be a welcome additional resource (Bullough et al, 1999). (pp. 285-286)

Edwards and Mutton (2007) found an additional benefit that mentor teachers take pleasure seeing pre-service teachers ‘learn to teach’ (p. 516). These benefits resonate strongly with the findings of this study. In addition, the participants in this study found the flexible funding arrangements to be a further benefit and an incentive. Kruger *et al.* (2009, p. 97) found ‘trust’ that mutual benefits will occur and ‘mutuality’, the recognition that mutual benefits have accrued, to be key elements of sustainable partnerships. This study did not consider the benefits to the university, but it seems that these elements were present for the school-based participants.

Continuity Over Time

It has long been known that educational change endeavours need to extend over prolonged periods of time for change to be embedded. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991, p. 49) reported that time spans of three to ten years are needed for the 'institutionalization' of change. The school-wide approach to professional experience required by the Stage 1 Program can be seen as a considerable change for participating schools. It is clear that the ongoing nature of the program, whereby the University and schools committed to working together year after year, has helped to 'institutionalize' the program. Becoming familiar with the program, and having the opportunity for ongoing evaluation and evolution, increased school colleagues' willingness to become involved and sustain involvement. It also benefited pre-service teachers as each school reviewed and adapted the program on a yearly basis to be more responsive to their needs and capitalise on recent school foci. According to Whyte (2000), many school/university partnerships falter when committed leaders and/or teachers leave the school. This has not been the case for this partnership, even though there have been many changes of leadership and staff over the years. It appears that continuity over a long period of time has resulted in the development of sufficient knowledge, expertise and documentation in each school for the program to be sustained.

Conclusion

Bloomfield (2009, p. 35) argued that partnerships need to 'be forged in locally appropriate ways' to be sustainable. The partnership explored in this study appears to have been deemed 'locally appropriate' by the school participants. The research found that despite the current difficulties in finding schools willing to offer placements for professional experience, there were features of the studied partnership approach that sustained long-term participation by school colleagues. To some extent these features evolved over time, rather than as the result of thoughtful design, but if incorporated in the design of future professional experience partnerships they may well increase the likelihood of long-term engagement by school colleagues.

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