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## School Co-ordinators: Leaders of Learning in Professional Experience

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*Abstract: It is widely accepted that professional experience or practicum is 'a critically important part of teacher education courses and is consistently valued highly by student teachers' (eg Ramsey, 2000; Teaching Australia, 2006; Parliament of Australia, 2007). In Australia and overseas there is a growing emphasis on teacher educators working in partnership with schools to construct professional experiences that maximise student teacher engagement and learning (Parliament of Australia, 2007). The literature on professional experience in pre-service teacher education provides varied and detailed accounts of the roles of the Pre-service Teacher, the Mentor Teacher and the University Mentor (see for example, Gaffey & Dobbins, 1996; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Zeichner, 1999). However the School based Professional Experience Co-ordinator, usually the principal or deputy principal, has received very little attention in the literature. The study on which this article is primarily based fills a gap in the existing literature on professional experience with its focus on the School based Co-ordinator role. It will be argued that Co-ordinators are essential in developing 'new' school-university partnerships which are necessary in ensuring high quality professional experiences.*

### Introduction

Professional experience in initial teacher education continues to be a very challenging area in which to work in universities, given the 'changing landscapes' (Clandinin, 2008) of schools and universities. Schools and universities are both experiencing increased pressures and accountability measures resulting in both teachers and academics reporting more intense and complex work lives and increasing problems associated with morale and wellbeing (Gu & Day, 2007; Hammond & Churchman, 2008). Moreover there continues to be a multiplicity of political, professional, economic and pragmatic issues that surround professional placements. At the same time there is a renewed interest in how schools and universities will work together to support teacher education. As we know, the idea of partnerships in teacher education is not new. There has been a long established call for school-university partnerships in the literature (eg Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Goodlad, 1998; Peters, 1997; Yeatman & Sachs, 1995) and government reports (eg Parliament of Australia, 2007) given the longstanding recognition that the student teaching experience is improved if schools and universities are 'in partnership'. What is new however is a growing recognition in the literature of the 'complex and contradictory aspects of partnerships' and the difficulties that arise when the notion of partnerships is presented un-problematically (Cardini, 2006; Bloomfield, 2009; White, Bloomfield & Le Cornu, 2010). As a result there has been a resurgent acknowledgement of the need for 'new' school-university partnerships. Such partnerships have a commitment to 'reciprocal learning relationships' (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009; Zeichner, 2010) and are deemed essential if professional experiences are to be of high quality and sustainable.

However the question needs to be asked; Who are the partners? Traditionally the literature on professional experience in pre-service teacher education has concentrated on three

participants– the student teacher, cooperating teacher and university supervisor. Varied and detailed accounts of their roles have been provided (see for example, Gaffey & Dobbins, 1996; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Zeichner, 1999) and indeed these three participants continue to be referred to as the ‘key triad members’ involved in practicum (Valencia, Martin, Place & Grossman, 2009; Kruger et al, 2009). Whilst there is no doubt that these three roles are important I want to argue that there is another essential partner, that of the ‘School based professional experience Co-ordinator.’ It is common in Australian schools for this role to be undertaken by the principal or deputy principal, but occasionally by an Advanced Skills Teacher or a classroom teacher. This role has received relatively little attention in the literature. It is only in the last decade that empirical work has been conducted on this role and even then, it is scant in comparison to the other roles.

Traditionally, where the role has been reported in the literature, it has been the managerial and administrative responsibilities of the Co-ordinator that have been highlighted. Martinez & Coombs (2001) were among the first to conduct an empirical study on the role, given their concern that the Co-ordinator had “been dismissed as an administrative outsider to the essential triad of pre-service supervision” (p. 275). Whilst acknowledging that efficient and competent administration is a key factor for successful practica experiences, they considered the role to be far more than that. Their small study confirmed this when it identified a diverse range of practices that were “crucial in ensuring that practicum is an occasion for quality learning” (Martinez & Coombs, 2001, p. 2). Utley, Basile & Rodes (2003) drew similar conclusions in their study of the role of the Site Co-ordinator in some Professional Development Schools in the United States. They emphatically concluded that the Co-ordinator is “the ‘glue’ of partner school work” (p. 516). More recently, Mutton & Butcher (2007) conducted a study in the UK which also challenged the earlier view. They found that the range of roles and responsibilities of school-based Initial Teacher Training Co-ordinators was wide and might generally be seen as falling into 4 distinct categories: 1/managerial and administrative, 2/pedagogical, 3/monitoring and assessment and 4/pastoral” (p, 51-52). Interestingly though, of the four aspects, the Co-ordinators themselves regarded their managerial and administrative responsibilities as the most important.

This article presents the findings of a small empirical study, which, unlike the earlier studies that set out to capture the full nature and scope of the Co-ordinator role, concentrates on the Co-ordinators’ pedagogical role. That is, it highlights what a small group of Co-ordinators did to support their pre-service teachers’ learning during their professional experiences at their schools. The article begins with some contextual information including details of the study. Some of the findings are presented next and the article concludes with a discussion of the key insights. It will be argued that when Co-ordinators adopt the role of ‘leaders of learning’, pre-service teachers’ learning is enhanced.

## **Background**

### **Context**

In a number of the programs and courses in the School of Education at the University of South Australia, attempts are being made to reconceptualise professional experience around the notion of *learning communities*. A learning communities model builds on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999) who conceptualized communities of practice as particular kinds of networks of people who were engaging in a situated learning process. This particular model of professional experience has a commitment to encouraging Pre-service Teacher (PST)

agency and providing increased opportunities for PSTs to engage with their peers and mentors in more collegial ways. Changes have been made to how professional experience is structured and to the roles of the various participants involved.

This article is based on the Master of Teaching (primary) program which is a two year program that includes three professional experience courses, each having a series of on-campus workshops, an online component and a professional experience placement which consists of four – six individual introductory days over as many weeks preceding a two - five week block. The following initiatives have been introduced:

- Professional experience course teams;
- Clustering in schools;
- Mentoring/site model of support; and
- Learning Circles.

These initiatives have been discussed elsewhere (see Le Cornu, 2007; 2008; 2009, 2010). and so will only be briefly described here out of consideration for the length of the article. *Professional experience course teams* have been developed where each lecturer is responsible for the teaching, learning and assessment of their workshop group of twenty five students in relation to the on-campus, on-line and in-school components of the course. *Clustering* means that there are groups of six to eight pre-service teachers placed in each school. We have moved to a *per site* model of support to replace the *per student* model, where each visit includes the university mentor spending as much time with the mentor teachers and site co-ordinators as with the pre-service teachers. And finally the term *Learning Circles* is used to describe learning communities of pre-service teachers who are placed together in the same on-campus workshop and in the same school for their professional experience placement and who meet regularly throughout the professional experience for professional dialogue.

Evaluation of these initiatives has been ongoing and findings from each of the studies have illuminated many benefits for reframing professional experiences around the notion of learning communities, as well as the challenges and dilemmas. One of the findings that emerged from all of the evaluations was how important the Co-ordinator role was to the successful implementation of the learning communities model and the contributions Co-ordinators made to pre-service teachers' learning. This was the catalyst for the study on which this article is based.

### **The study**

The study focused on six Co-ordinators who were involved with the Master of Teaching Program - 3 principals and 3 deputy principals. The Co-ordinators were highly experienced, both in the role itself (each had held the post of Co-ordinator for over five years) and as teachers/leaders in general (each had been teaching for more than 20 years). The criteria for their inclusion in the study was that they had been involved with the Master of Teaching for a minimum of two years and they had been identified in the earlier studies as having an impact on PSTs' learning. The specific aims of the study were to identify the Co-ordinators' perceptions of their role and to capture and document their exemplary practices. Key questions were:

- How does the role of the school based professional experience Co-ordinator contribute to high quality professional experiences for pre-service teachers?;
- What strategies do they use to support pre-service teachers' learning in their site?; and

- What supports and/or hinders their work as a professional experience Co-ordinator?

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted initially. Each interview took approx 60 minutes and these were taped and transcribed. A focus group was then conducted with the Co-ordinators to further explore emerging themes. The transcripts and meeting notes were analysed using a process of coding and categorizing which led to key themes being identified. A further focus group was conducted where the Co-ordinators reviewed the themes and validated the interpretation of their role.

It is acknowledged that the study on which this article is based is small. It is also acknowledged that the Co-ordinators involved are quite a unique group of senior professional colleagues, given their considerable expertise and wisdom and given that they have been involved with an innovative professional experience program for a period of time. However, it is precisely because of these qualities and experiences that these particular Co-ordinators were selected for the study. A deliberate decision was made in planning the study to invoke the principles of 'Appreciative Inquiry' (Hammond, 1998). The objective of Appreciative Inquiry is to elucidate the assets and strengths of a situation. It asks questions like "What's working well?", "What's good about what you are currently doing?" By valuing the best of what is and making it explicit, there are opportunities for renewal, change and improved performance. Studying 'exemplary Co-ordinators' and providing insights about their influential work with PSTs makes a contribution to our understandings about what is needed for high quality professional experiences that *make a difference* to PST learning.

## Findings

This next section presents the main findings in relation to the research questions. *How does the role of the school based professional experience co-ordinator contribute high quality professional experiences for pre-service teachers?*

In answering this question the Co-ordinators illuminated their thinking behind *why* they do what they do. They discussed the role of professional experiences, what contributes to high quality professional experiences and how they perceived their Co-ordinator role.

### The role of professional experiences

The Co-ordinators were obviously very committed to initial teacher education given their ongoing involvement in hosting PSTs in their schools. Therefore it is not surprising that every Co-ordinator recognized the central role that professional experiences play in learning to teach. They cited the main reasons as the need for the theory/practice link, learning in context and testing PSTs' commitment to teaching. All of the Co-ordinators focused on professional experience as a *learning* time for PSTs. Whilst they acknowledged the learning that comes from being in classrooms, they particularly emphasized the learning for PSTs beyond the classroom. They wanted them to learn about the whole role of a teacher. The following comment was indicative; "*they need to learn the big picture, the reality of what life is like in a school*" (C5). The Co-ordinators also wanted PSTs to understand the collaborative nature of teaching and that they needed to be "*team players*". They believed that teaching was no longer about "*teachers being insular in their own little world in their own class*" (C3).

A number of the Co-ordinators acknowledged that their view of professional experiences differed from some of their teachers' views. As one Co-ordinator said, there is a "*commonly held view that classroom based work is the most critical therefore there is tension between classroom time and wider school/educational issues*" (C4).

### **Contributing factors for high quality professional experiences**

The Co-ordinators identified four key elements that they believed contributed to high quality professional experiences: the quality of Mentor Teachers (MTs), commitment from leadership, the quality of the University Mentors and the Program's commitment to the notion of a *learning community*. The quality of MTs was mentioned first by all six Co-ordinators. They wanted MTs who were prepared to share their classrooms, spend time with the PSTs and provide authentic feedback.

The second element that they regarded as important for high quality professional experiences was commitment from the principal. The Co-ordinators acknowledged that teachers would be more willing to accept PSTs into the school community if there was explicit support from the principal and the Leadership team. (In South Australian public schools the leadership team consists of the principal, deputy or assistant principal and Key Teachers or Learning Co-ordinators). Interestingly, all participants stressed the importance of the Co-ordinator role being adopted by a member of the leadership team. The main reason given was in the message it would send to the PSTs and/or the MTs. Two of the principals in the study explained; "*Having the co-ordinator as part of the leadership team is crucial...they [pre-service teachers] are getting a very clear message that they are valued*" (C1). And another said "*By me being involved it makes a statement to the rest of the staff that it [professional experience] is valued*" (C2).

The third key element was the University Mentor. The Co-ordinators valued the reconceptualised role of the University Mentor in this program which came about as a result of the change to the per site model of support mentioned above. This meant that the university mentor prioritized support for all of the participants involved in professional experience including the Co-ordinators, as well as the MTs and PSTs. Ongoing shared dialogue, during school visits and meetings, was a feature of the University Mentor's work which was particularly appreciated. Also, the Co-ordinators had all been working with the University Mentor for at least two years and in some cases, four or five years, so that a respectful, trusting relationship had been developed. This, they felt, was crucial to the Partnership. As one principal said, "*...it is very much a partnership... a collaborative relationship*" (C6).

Finally, in regard to the issue of quality, was the Program's commitment to the development of a learning community. The Co-ordinators valued the Program's commitments to reflection, collaboration and reciprocity. They felt that these concepts were congruent with the philosophy of their schools and that each would support the other. That is, that both the PSTs and their teachers would benefit from their involvement in the Program.

Three of the Co-ordinators also mentioned the quality of the PSTs themselves as a key factor in determining the quality of professional experiences. These Co-ordinators wanted and expected PSTs "*to be learners*" (C4).

### **Co-ordinators' perceptions of their role**

The Co-ordinators all took their role very seriously and felt that they had a “*moral obligation to future teachers*” (C6) and a “*responsibility to the system*” (C2). They saw their role as having three main inter-related components; supporting MTs, supporting PSTs and being the link between their school and the university. This latter one involved building a relationship with the University Mentor and also being an advocate for the program with staff.

The Co-ordinators described their role in a variety of ways, depending on which aspect of the role they were highlighting. One of the leaders concentrated on his role with the PSTs, when he said; “*I have the responsibility of setting up learning opportunities for them...*” (C6). This particular Co-ordinator was adamant that “*the experience of student teachers shouldn’t rely on a roll of the dice of being with a good mentor or not*”. Another Co-ordinator focused on the role she now played with her MTs;

*I have learnt that I can’t assume that mentor teachers are going to understand and know the information and the expectations fully so my job is as much about working with the mentor teachers as working with the student teachers.* (C2)

Several also commented on how their perceptions of the role had changed since they had become more involved in the program. For example, one said; “*When we started I saw it mainly as an organizing role...I have learned that it is no different to the role that you have as an education leader with your own staff...*” (C1).

All of the Co-ordinators unreservedly saw their role as supporting the Program’s explicit commitments to reflection and collaboration. They saw their role as one that complemented the MTs’ very necessary focus on the classroom to ensure that PSTs had a whole school focus in keeping with their beliefs about the role of professional experiences. Four of the Co-ordinators mentioned making time to talk with the PSTs about the “*bigger picture of being a teacher*”. For example, “*I deliberately discuss issues with them that have conflicting arguments*” (C5).

### **What strategies do the Co-ordinators use to support pre-service teachers’ learning?**

The second research question was aimed at capturing the strategies that the Co-ordinators used to support the PSTs’ learning. The Co-ordinators were clear that their own beliefs about teaching and learning had a strong influence on the work they did in their role as Co-ordinators. They implemented strategies which were consistent with these beliefs. Most prominent were their beliefs about the importance of relationships, critical reflection and being a learner. As mentioned earlier they saw their role as having three main inter-related components; supporting PSTs, supporting MTs and being the link between their school and the university. Each of these is presented next. This section also includes some data from a cohort of PSTs to illuminate their perspective on the strategies. These data were generated from an open-ended questionnaire distributed to 52 PSTs asking them to give feedback on all aspects of learning support provided to them during their professional experience.

#### **Strategies with pre-service teachers**

All of the Co-ordinators enacted strategies to provide direct support to the PSTs to ensure that their learning from their professional experience was maximized. There were three key areas identified in their work with PSTs:

- Developing relationships;
- Encouraging reflective practice; and
- Providing assistance to maximise learning from the whole school experiences.

### *Developing relationships*

The strategies used to build relationships included;

- being welcoming: eg introducing PSTs at staff meeting, writing a welcome message in the day book, pigeonholes, name badge, etc
- structuring scheduled times to talk – getting to know PSTs, having professional and personal conversations
- establishing clear lines of communication (open door policy) – offering support and encouragement
- providing induction; letting student teachers know about grievance procedures, duty of care issues, setting clear expectations.

The importance of building a positive relationship was highlighted also by the PSTs in their evaluation of the Co-ordinators. They identified the following characteristics of Co-ordinators which they believed helped to build such a relationship: being friendly, approachable, supportive and understanding. They also highlighted the importance of time being made available to them as can be seen in the following exemplary comments; “*they spent time talking to us to get to know us*” and “*they made time to discuss concerns/have a chat*”. Having allocated time was particularly appreciated by the PSTs given that they had observed how busy the Co-ordinators were in their leadership roles in the schools.

### *Encouraging reflective practice*

The strategies used by the Co-ordinators to encourage reflective practice included:

- having critical reflection times with them – asking challenging questions and helping them to examine their own world views eg Are there other ways of looking at that? What does that say about you believe? What is your understanding of...? Why?;
- teaching them how to engage in ‘rigorous dialogue’ and how to be articulate in a staff group (using rehearsal);
- observing in classrooms and providing useful feedback (ie great things happening/things to consider and posing questions eg “Did you think about how the task might be more open ended to better cater for your high achievers?”);
- encouraging risk taking -talking to them about “being a learner”;
- modelling ‘being a learner’ eg being open about mistakes; and
- being positive about the PSTs’ Learning Circles.

The PSTs also appreciated the Co-ordinators being involved in their learning. As one PST wrote in their evaluation; “*The Co-ordinator got involved in our learning and development as developing teachers. It helped us make sense of everything.*” A key element of the reflective process was a commitment to social justice. All Co-ordinators, regardless of their context, wanted PSTs to consider which students were advantaged and which students were disadvantaged by particular teaching and assessment methods and strategies. As one leader explained, “*It’s having the skills of being able to listen to things you hear, look at things you read and see and put the critical layer through it all the time*”. (C5)



The Co-ordinators varied in how much time they spent in classrooms, observing and giving feedback. However a number did do it systematically as they felt that it was a part of their role. Where this occurred, the PSTs particularly valued the detailed feedback they received.

*Providing assistance to maximise learning from their whole school experiences*

The strategies used by Co-ordinators to maximise PST learning included:

- talking to PSTs about school-wide issues eg behavior management, NAPLAN, etc;
- pointing things out to them that they may not have noticed;
- encouraging PSTs to question what they see;
- organising talks with specialist teachers;
- encouraging PSTs to go to different places to see different learning environments;
- referring them to curriculum documents;
- exposing them to different experiences ie attend meetings with parents, talk to School Support Officers; and
- helping organise school-wide/extra-curricular activities.

All Co-ordinators went out of their way to ensure that the PSTs learnt about the whole school as well as their classroom. They each planned different experiences depending on their particular context. Again, this was affirmed by the PSTs as being very useful to their learning. They described what the Co-ordinators did as *“integrating us into the whole school community.”*

**Strategies with Mentor Teachers**

The Co-ordinators also provided indirect support to the pre-service teachers by supporting the mentor teachers. Because they believed that quality MTs were crucial to enable quality professional experiences they did everything they could to ensure that their MTs felt supported in their roles. They also believed that there were different skills required of their teachers to be a good MT. As one leader said, *“You can’t assume that their [mentors] professionalism as a classroom teacher automatically flips them into having skills as an adult educator. A mentor teacher is essentially an adult educator”*. (C2)

The strategies the Co-ordinators used to support MTs included:

- establishing meetings with MTs – to clarify professional experience guidelines and expectations, clarify the MT role, provide support with report writing, focus on providing evidence for the decisions made by MTs;
- being available to debrief/ talk through concerns;
- encouraging ‘two pronged attack’ with struggling PSTs (ie communicating closely between MTs and the University Mentor);
- affirming their classroom practices; and
- providing constructive feedback.

The PSTs did not mention this aspect of the Co-ordinator’s role. This is not surprising given that the PSTs’ focus was on the direct support they received from the Co-ordinators.

**Being the Link between the school and the university**

The Co-ordinators saw the relationship between school and university as very important. They therefore valued the role of the University Mentor. They were keen to work *with* the

University Mentor in providing a successful learning experience for the PSTs. They willingly adopted the job of 'being the link between the school and the university' and liaising closely with the University Mentor.

The strategies used to link school and university included:

- meeting with the university mentor each visit (two or three times each placement);
- attending meetings with other Co-ordinators which were organized by the University Mentor;
- being positive about PSTs and the university with staff; and
- talking to staff about the thinking behind 'new structures' eg Learning Circles, pairs, cross-site visits, etc.

Once again, very few PSTs mentioned the role that the Co-ordinator played in being the conduit between the university and the school. However the following comment from a PST highlights the importance of the Co-ordinator being seen to be supportive of all participants involved in professional experience; "*She was behind us, the mentors and the university 100%, offered support and encouragement to us all.*"

### **What supports and/or hinders their work as Co-ordinators?**

The Co-ordinators identified both supportive factors and hindrances to their work in this particular role.

#### **Supportive Factors**

Four main supports were identified by the Co-ordinators in helping them fulfil their role. These were: Co-ordinator meetings, the University Mentor, commitment from school leadership and how the professional experience was structured.

Meetings with the Co-ordinators from all of the participating schools and the university mentors were held 3-4 times a year. These meetings were always well attended which in itself indicates the esteem in which they were held by the participants. The Co-ordinators liked "*engaging in reflective dialogue*" about their role and sharing strategies with each other. As one Co-ordinator said; "*It's like our own Learning Circle and being able to use people who aren't directly involved as a sounding board with tricky situations*" (C3).

The visits made to the school by the University Mentor during professional experience were also seen as supportive. This support enabled Co-ordinators to "*know that you are not doing it by yourself.*" Also the visits acted as a stimulus for the Co-ordinators to re-engage with the PSTs. As one leader explained, "*when the busyness starts to creep in...your visits are useful for keeping me on track...keeping the PSTs as a priority*" (C1). Alongside of University Mentor visits, contact was maintained by email and phone. There were also clearly written guidelines from the university with clarification of expectations for PSTs' teaching, planning and assessing, reflecting and engaging with peers and colleagues. These guidelines were presented via Newsletters at regular intervals throughout the year.

The third supportive element for the Co-ordinators in their role was the commitment from school leadership. It is noteworthy that three of the Co-ordinators interviewed for this study were Principals. As explained earlier, this was because of their strong commitment to initial teacher education and the clear message they wanted to send to their staff about its importance. The other three Co-ordinators were Deputy Principals and each one of them emphasized the fact that

it mattered that their Principal was supportive of the role. For example, as one Deputy said, “*I get free reign as to how I am going to be involved with it...The fact that there is interest and value in my role from my principal is important*”. (C3)

The fourth element relates to aspects of how this particular professional experience is structured. The main structures included PSTs being placed in schools in groups, Learning Circles (where PSTs meet together to reflect on their learning) and being placed in each school for a year. The Co-ordinators liked the year long program because a depth of relationships was able to be established, the PSTs were able to see development over time and it gave the PSTs a sense of belonging. They also liked having a group of PSTs in the school because it made it easier for them to work with them as a critical mass. They also felt supported by the program’s reciprocity expectation which refers to the explicit expectation that the PSTs would make a contribution back to the school. For example, one of the PSTs was an experienced soccer coach and so he ran soccer clinics for the whole school. These structures and expectations supported the work of the Co-ordinators because as several of them said, “*the school is also getting something out of it*”.

The Co-ordinators also liked the ways that the roles of the PSTs, MTs, University Mentors and Co-ordinator were enacted in this program. One leader noted that “*the relationships and roles seem to fit together and work together*” (C1). They commented that the MTs felt valued and this then made their work easier the following year when the call went out for PST placements. This is not an insignificant issue given the current placement difficulties faced by Australian Universities’ Schools of Education.

Finally, several mentioned the PSTs themselves and how they felt supported by them in regard to the culture that they were trying to cultivate in their schools. For example, “*It is exciting to see the impact that the PSTs have on the culture of our school*” (C5) and another; “*...I love the enthusiasm that so many of them bring...and their love of learning*” (C6). A number of the Co-ordinators spoke about the benefit of having access to newly qualified teachers and being able to employ them the following year. As one principal said; “*We have built up some good relationships with some of them and have re-employed some of them as contracts so I like building those bridges and those networks with them.*”

### **Hindrances**

The main hindrance, not surprisingly was time. All Co-ordinators emphasised the time and commitment that is needed in undertaking the role. In identifying what they had learnt about the role, several Co-ordinators stressed that time needed to be set aside for it and that “*You have to structure it into the diary (C2)*” As one of the principals said in answer to the question about what hinders their work as Professional Experience Co-ordinator; “*the rest of my job!*” (C1). The time factor related to making time to meet with the PSTs, but also there was an acknowledgement of the “*pressure of time for quality conversations.*” Another time factor was that of fitting university requirements in, given “*the sheer weight of things that happen in schools at times*”.

However, other hindrances included disinterested PSTs and attitudes of staff. This latter one included teacher disinterest in taking on the responsibility of PSTs but also attitudes which might appear to undermine the wider school focus of the program.

### **Discussion**

This study has provided some insights into why the Co-ordinators in these schools have played such a crucial role in the successful implementation of the learning communities model of professional experience. Firstly it is clear from the Co-ordinators' willingness to work with PSTs, MTs and the University Mentor in the ways that they did, that they enacted the role of 'leaders of learning' (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). That is, they were leaders who placed *learning* at the centre of their practices. They focused on the PSTs as learners and they positioned themselves as learners also. This latter attitude was evident in their willingness to undertake the role of Co-ordinator in the new professional experience model which positioned them very much as 'learning partners' (see Le Cornu, 2010).

Secondly, these Co-ordinators were leading the development of their schools as learning communities and so the notions of reflection and collaboration, upon which the particular Teacher Education Professional Experience Program is based, were encouraged and explicitly supported. Ewing (2002) also found that changes to professional experiences based on a learning communities model were most successful in schools which were themselves professional learning communities. The Co-ordinators all valued *learning relationships* and *learning conversations* and saw them as vital aspects of a learning culture. Hence they supported groups of PSTs in their schools and prioritized opportunities for learning conversations as they believed these to be central to all teachers' ongoing learning. They also endeavoured to have learning conversations with MTs and were themselves a part of many conversations with the University Mentor and other Co-ordinators. A 'culture of discourse' was also found to be important for enhancing opportunities for student teacher learning in Mutton & Butcher's (2008) study.

The key finding from this study is that School Co-ordinators are essential players in implementing the notion of new school-university partnerships. It is no longer useful to talk about the 'prac triad' as though there are just three main players in professional experience. It must be recognized, as Valencia et al (2010), have done, that '...there are multiple structures and relationships that shape the student teaching experience' (p. 320).

I would argue that if PST learning from their professional experiences is to be maximised, the vital role that Co-ordinators can play *directly* and *indirectly* with PSTs' learning needs to be acknowledged. This study has highlighted the importance of the Co-ordinator's **pedagogical** role in professional experience. As well as supporting PSTs' learning to teach, they also supported the broader focus of them learning to be teachers. Given the changing landscapes (Clandinin, 2009) of schools and universities and the ever-increasing complexity of being a teacher, this is a noteworthy distinction. Peters (2011) also confirmed the importance of the Co-ordinator's pedagogical role in her study of a long-term school-university partnership in a first year professional experience program. She found that Co-ordinators were central to providing a supportive culture in each of the schools where the partnership flourished. And certainly this was also the case in this current study. It was the Co-ordinators who set the tone of the relationships that were established in the participating schools and thus enabled the ongoing partnership with the university to endure in such a productive manner.

This study has also highlighted the vital role that Co-ordinators can play in the reculturing of professional experience. That is, in bringing about changes in the shared beliefs, customs, attitudes and expectations around professional experience. I have been arguing for over a decade now that;

If changes to the way the practicum is structured are to result in 'deep change' rather than 'superficial change', they must be accompanied by cultural change in work settings' and

universities' values, beliefs, habits, assumptions and ways of doing things. (Le Cornu, 1999, p. 90)

In supporting the move to a *learning communities* model of professional experience, the Co-ordinators were supporting a change from a classroom based professional experience with a skills focus to one that is school based and has a wider professional understandings focus. They clearly demonstrated their support by taking on the role of Co-ordinator and they were also strong advocates of the program with their staffs. They needed at times to talk up the changes, particularly with some of the MTs who believed that 'prac' was only about classroom based activity. They willingly engaged with their colleagues from other schools and the University Mentor to explore different ways of doing things and to unpack underlying assumptions around professional experience. In so doing, they were prepared to overthrow the status quo (of traditional professional experience), which is very necessary for reculturing to occur. It is also a vital component of *learning leadership* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009).

Another insight from this study is that the role of Co-ordinator is best undertaken by a member of the Leadership team in a school. The Co-ordinators in this study willingly took on this role even though their leadership role in the school was already busy and time consuming. They did this because they believed that support from leadership was essential for high quality professional experiences. Mutton & Butcher (2007), in their study of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Co-ordinators, found that a factor that appeared to be of importance was the status within the school of the teacher carrying out the responsibilities of the ITT Co-ordinator. I would agree. Whilst there is no doubt that there are many capable teachers who could take on the role of the Co-ordinator, I would argue that if we want to bring about substantial sustainable changes in professional experience, then we need the support of leaders in schools to do this.

The findings affirm the significance of the development of reciprocal learning relationships between all of the participants in professional experiences. Reciprocal learning relationships are at the heart of the reconceptualised professional experience framework (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Such relationships are not so heavily concentrated on a hierarchy of power and allow for new partnerships to be developed between and amongst PSTs, MTs, School Co-ordinators and University Mentors. As Cardini (2006) noted, while the discourse within partnerships often emphasizes co-operation and trust it 'hides the complex struggles for power that take place in working relationships' (p. 410). It is no secret that there are many traditional barriers between schools and universities (often referred to as the schools-university divide in Teacher Education reports) which often exacerbate efforts of teachers and teacher educators working together in collaboration (Kruger et al, 2009). This is not to suggest that the power imbalances between all participants in professional experience are obliterated in the learning communities model but by having an explicit focus on learning and by having the commitment of Co-ordinators in schools, it ensures that at least there is the potential for reciprocal learning relationships to be developed.

To help illuminate the complex dynamic and processes at work in new forms of school-university collaboration, it is useful to embrace the concept of a 'third space' (Bhabba, 1990). The notion of third space comes from hybridity theory which recognises that individuals draw on multiple discourses to make sense of the world. Zeichner (2010) has used this notion of third space to call for the creation of hybrid spaces in pre-service teacher education 'that bring together school and university-based teacher educators and practitioner and academic knowledge in new ways to enhance the learning of prospective teachers' (p. 92). The learning communities model upon which this new role for Co-ordinators is based, creates these hybrid spaces by providing new opportunities for the various participants involved in professional experience to work differently and more collaboratively. All participants are enabled to work towards building

a collective third space where traditional boundaries are crossed, new relationships are formed and new and shared understandings are developed.

This article has specifically focused on the role of the Co-ordinator and the crucial role Co-ordinators play in scaffolding a collective third space. Martin, Snow & Terrez (2011) conceptualised the pedagogical implications of third space as ‘...educational practices that provide and mediate rich learning opportunities within complex and often conflicting social contexts’ (p. 300). The Co-ordinators in this study provided these opportunities by prioritising *learning time* for the PSTs. They structured times for conversations into the busy schedule of a school day and provided other opportunities for them to mix with a range of educators rather than relying solely on the MT. This made it possible for the PSTs to have increased opportunities to make sense of their professional experience and their developing knowledge base about teaching and learning. They did this by reflecting on their experiences and being encouraged to examine their perspectives alongside peers and colleagues. The Co-ordinators actively sought out the PST views and presented conflicting arguments so that the PSTs were challenged to consider issues from a variety of positions. The PSTs were also encouraged to use the learning space as a time to ask questions and clarify any concerns they had in regard to their developing knowledge about being an educator. We know that PSTs risk ‘being adrift on a sea of knowledges’ (Martinez, 1998, p. 1) and that there are often disconnects between what is taught in coursework and what is learnt in field experiences (Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman & Nichols, 2011). Having a space to grapple with the plethora of tensions and contradictions inherent in learning to teach is a step forward to enable PSTs to mediate their learning and to be able to integrate and expand their knowledge.

It is not possible within the confines of this article to discuss the many implications that arise from a consideration of new school-university partnerships. Suffice to say that if the development of learning communities is to be taken seriously, there are implications for teacher educators, teachers, leaders, pre-service teachers, systems personnel and policy makers alike. Kruger et al (2009), in their study on effective and sustainable partnerships, wrote; ‘No finding is clearer in this study than the need for active contributions by school systems and governments’ (p. 12). It is very apparent that this contribution would need to come in the form of funding for new institutional arrangements and initiatives that highlight reciprocity and involve key stakeholders. Leaders in both institutions, schools and universities, need to be working *together* in new ways if we are serious about the changes we want to see in professional experiences. It will not be easy. We need to be realistic and acknowledge that any substantial change to professional experience, particularly changes that require a commitment and willingness to interact differently, will require a lot of effort and goodwill – at the personal as well as the systems level. It will also require explicit recognition by both Systems of Education and Universities, of the work involved by Co-ordinators, teachers, leaders and academics in establishing and sustaining partnerships. This work needs to be valued and rewarded. As Bullough & Russell (2010) remind us, “it will take massive efforts to transform the deeply entrenched culture of existing field experience arrangements and practices.” (p. 93).

## Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that Co-ordinators can play a key **pedagogical** role in professional experiences. Based on the insights afforded by a study of six exemplary Co-ordinators, it has been shown that Co-ordinators can influence what PSTs learn from their professional experiences when they adopt the role of leaders of learning. This involves Co-

ordinators supporting PSTs both *directly* and *indirectly* in their learning. Direct support resulted from the Co-ordinators implementing strategies to ensure that PSTs' learning from their professional experience was maximized. Indirect support came about as a result of the Co-ordinators working closely with the MTs and the University Mentor and also by the work they did within their schools to establish the right conditions to support teacher learning as well as children's learning. By being committed to PST learning, as well as to the learning of their MTs and other staff and by exploring different ways of 'doing prac', the Co-ordinators made a difference at multiple levels - at both the micro (school) level and the macro (professional experience reform) level. Hence it is concluded that they are essential partners in new forms of effective school-university partnerships for initial teacher education.

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