

## **Capitalising on Shared Knowledge, Experience and Expertise to Enhance Professional Learning for School and University Educators**

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**Abstract:** The preparation of future school teachers requires an enormous commitment and contribution from the school sector. In addition to the study undertaken in tertiary institutions, preservice teachers gain experience and knowledge from the immersion in authentic school contexts through experimentation and reflection. Unfortunately this relationship is mainly perceived as unidirectional as the teachers impart their expertise, carrying out a service for university teacher preparation courses. Teacher education however is not just about preservice learning, but a career long necessity for all educators. Are many opportunities for learning being missed or ignored in current joint university and school practices? Are there mutually beneficial outcomes not being maximised? This paper argues that the experience, expertise and knowledge of educators in the schools and universities have a lot to offer one another, but they are not capitalised upon because of the existence of workplace cultural barriers and perceptions that militate against a collaborative and accepting relationship. Little incentive for individuals and institutions, together with limited structural support does not promote a favourable environment for improvement. Following an analysis of relevant literature and observation of practice in Australia and the United States, the paper strongly recommends a rethink of the alliances between universities and schools to capitalise upon the enormous potential for professional learning for university academics, school teachers, institutional leaders and system decision makers alike. While teacher professional learning occurs in many forms, the need to reflect upon traditional practices, and take advantage of opportunities is universally relevant.

**Keywords:** Partnerships; professional relationships; mutual benefit; reciprocity; change.

### **Introduction**

Schools and universities may have different educational targets, but they are partners on the continuum of formal learning and have a range of connections with one another. As many school students enter university, alliances to facilitate this transition and maximise success are significant. Universities rely on the experience of teachers and the school contexts to assist in the preparation of future teachers through involvement in the practicum. University learning and research has positive implications for schools – improving teaching practice and student learning outcomes. Schools provide a rich context for research and knowledge generation. These are some of the potential benefits to be gained through school-university alliances that contribute to the constantly evolving educational scene.

Productive professional alliances within and across institutions achieve maximum benefit when reciprocity is valued. For guaranteed commitment, explicit acknowledgement of mutually beneficial outcomes, where clear understanding of what each partner has to offer, and of what each partner wants to gain, is important. The more committed the partners to collaboration, the greater is the potential for capitalising on the unique experiences and expertise that are available in professional learning partnerships.

Schools and universities are not worlds apart but are different in their particular perspectives, priorities and ways of operating. This paper proposes that while the possibilities for beneficial alliances are many, the actual uptake of opportunities is limited because of the taken-for-granted practices and long-held attitudes and understandings of traditional school-

university relationships. There are cultural, structural and operational barriers evident in the workplace that threaten the realisation of maximum benefits.

### **Traditional partnerships**

In Australia, the majority of formal partnership work between schools and universities revolves around the preparation of preservice teachers through the professional experience programs (practicum). Other alliances exist (participation on committees, research, professional development seminars, career counselling etc) but they tend to be individually organised, particularly from the university side, and often lack a sense of institutional commitment (Peters, 2002). Identification of collaborative opportunities relies mainly upon the initiative of individuals rather than a wider, institutional collaboration as partners. The outcomes are therefore often recognized and disseminated in a limited way; not shared in the wider context where additional benefit and learning may be accessed

In the majority of cases the preservice teacher professional experience relationship is perceived as unidirectional; the school offering a service for the university, providing a teacher/class for a student of the university. The focus is predominantly on the learning of the preservice teacher and insufficient recognition of other possible related activity or learning is evident. This quite narrow perspective is unfortunately widespread as it is only the process of placing preservice teachers in schools that is formalised; other activities appear to occur more serendipitously; totally dependent upon the initiative of individuals.

Widely accepted in the Australian context and other places around the world, is the practice the education of teachers happens in universities with limited participation by the schools. In-service professional learning for qualified teachers, on the other hand, has its locus in the school environment with scant involvement from the universities. In the overall picture there is relatively small overlap of what are seen as distinct teacher learning 'events'.

While the outcomes of professional experience practice in teacher education courses have changed over time, there is a tendency to cling to the traditional practicum approach which focuses on practice, supervision and assessment. More contemporary views of preservice teacher preparation support a more future focused and collegial environment of learning, reflection and mentoring that aims to prepare more flexible and reflective practitioners; an approach that acknowledges a satisfying and learning opportunity for the mentor too (Walkington, 2005). When a unidirectional approach evident, and where no reciprocal action/advantage is detected, the sustained commitment of time and energy is jeopardised (Millwater & Yarrow, 2001).

Traditional partnerships are also characterised by a deep seated suspicion that exists between staff in schools and universities (Grundy, Robinson, & Tomazos, 2001). This historically reinforces diverse perspectives that threaten many potentially collaborative outcomes. There is an understandable difference between the way university academics and teachers approach professional learning. However a gulf between them exists more because of the traditional lack of professional exchange between them, resulting in the lack of acknowledgement of one another's expertise (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). The distinctive assumptions made by teachers and academics about one another's roles, responsibilities, and ways of work, lead to a lack of real understanding and a difficulty in establishing professional respect (Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Holland, 2001).

### **Why do things differently?**

The work of educators in both schools and universities is focused on bringing about effective student learning outcomes, therefore any change that enhances the learning outcomes must be considered positive. Additionally, change that also enhances the satisfaction that educators feel about their teaching role is of benefit to them personally as well as to their productivity within their institutions.

In both school and university environments there is intellectual capital that is underutilised or even unrealised and therefore goes untapped. The expertise, knowledge and experience that teachers and academics possess have much to contribute to one another's professional learning. Teachers in schools engage with students, the curriculum, and the school contexts on a daily basis. They experience the social pressures surrounding school education. They need to respond to changes in policy, the introduction of innovation and changing student imperatives. They are leaders in the classroom, the faculty, or perhaps at a school level. The knowledge and experience they gain at 'the chalk face' is invaluable in assisting preservice teachers, curriculum decision makers, policymakers and researchers. While they have much to offer, is sufficient advantage taken of this expertise and experience?

The role of university academics includes the preparation of professionals through their teaching, knowledge generation through their research, and knowledge dissemination through their networks and publishing. Through this activity, academics in education faculties possess the focused ability to influence curriculum content, pedagogical practice, and policy formation. Is sufficient advantage being taken of this? Could closer liaison with schools produce more beneficial outcomes? Educational research in authentic contexts reinforces the interrelatedness of theory and practice. Sustained professional learning needs sustained practical engagement.

Recognition of the complementary expertise that exists in a closer working partnership between teachers and academics has the potential to create powerful and expanded learning. However, being able to appreciate benefits both for themselves as individual educators and for their institution is required to enhance the motivation to participate. Benefits may be of varying kinds. They can be tangible such as contributions to learning programs in one another's institution, or more esoteric such as an enhanced sense of self worth, empowerment and satisfaction.

The preservice teacher program, as an example, can promote more than one kind of outcome. A mature school–university relationship builds on the initial mentoring partnership activities, to seek other opportunities and dimensions. Fully utilising teacher expertise in this situation may include teachers presenting guest classes to university students on current pedagogical practices, new policy initiatives or workplace management. Academics can reciprocate through the presentation of research findings related to school practice. Preservice teachers can assist classroom teachers to understand the latest technology through incorporating it in their lessons. These are but a few examples of extending professional learning through the acknowledgement of expertise in the different settings. Availing themselves of collegial opportunities allows teachers in schools and universities to maintain currency and be informed: the result of which reinforces the integrity of the education profession.

### **Sustainable partnerships**

Sound educational partnerships are particularly worthwhile if they are sustainable over the longer term, changing as required to meet the needs of all stakeholders. The development of partnerships that create learning communities rather than single task relationships (Sim, 2005) provide flexibility to adapt, grow and maintain viability. Sustainability is more likely to result from a range of stakeholders taking responsibility for outcomes rather than a singular or hierarchical approach where ownership is limited to only a few, and activities are viewed as ‘one off’ tasks. Participation in longer term and multi-task projects encourages acceptance of the relationships by school and university staff alike and they embed collaboration in the culture of the institution. This is extremely important to breaking down traditional workplace cultural barriers and assumptions. Facilitation by committed leadership that values the cultural and attitudinal changes that occur in mature and meaningful partnerships adds to their sustainability and effectiveness (Moyle, 2006).

Sustainable partnerships value reciprocity and the benefits gained from giving and taking in professional discourse and activity. Seeking mutual benefits - acknowledging the ‘what’s in it for me?’ perspective – values the needs of all stakeholders to have a say in the outcomes and processes. Focus on developing a shared professional culture rather than a unidirectional service perception, promotes a sense of belonging and benefit (Sim, 2005; Walkington, 2003). The advantage of recognising the relationship from a learning community rather than from a single issue approach is the multiplicity of potential benefits that go beyond a single cause. A learning community represents a web of people interacting in small and large groups depending upon the nature of specific tasks. Participants cannot be ‘outliers’, but must become members of the evolving institutional culture of valuing and practising collaboration.

### **Factors that support/inhibit productive partnerships**

There are a number of developments, practices and perspectives that threaten productive collaborative partnerships. Taken-for-granted practices need rethinking in order to explore alternatives. The most obvious activity where the major players work together is the practicum - the professional experience component of teacher education programs. It is also the site of a fundamental problem. Instead of schools and universities sharing responsibility for teacher education, it tends to be characterised by a division of power and responsibilities (Prof Malcolm Skilbeck, as witness to the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2006).

Roles, responsibilities and practice established through traditional understanding of relationships, entrenched over time, are in need of consideration - of what might be retained and what may no longer be relevant or appropriate. Teacher roles in schools and academic roles in universities have evolved within a different set of parameters and imperatives and have created differing priorities and points of focus. However differences can be utilised as a point of strength too when used to collaboratively seek best practice.

As an example, practising teachers in schools have perceptions about what teacher education should be, based upon their own experiences. These may well differ from those ideas held by teacher educators in universities. Other models of teacher education, including fully in-school programs and ‘teaching schools’ have been suggested (Buckingham, 2005; Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2006). Opportunities for practising teachers and university teacher educators to discuss such matters bodes well for a shared understanding and encourages potentially wider, and more current input into teacher education programs. Reflection and discourse between educators from different settings supports the development of relationships of more respect and trust.

Educational partnerships operate within environments affected by ‘politics’ of all kinds. The development of broad policy, the allocation of budgets and staff, reward incentives and conditions are often driven bureaucratically and outside the immediate area of partnership participant influence. Sometimes decision making appears more for expediency than educational soundness; e.g. the balancing of government or employer budgets. However, these are constraints that everyone must accept. Reducing the political nature of the relationship towards one of collaboration and collegiality requires a conscious effort to evaluate the constraints and work around them; identifying and utilising the supports to maximise effectiveness.

While partnerships may have professional learning as their goal, the allocation/re-allocation of resources is critical in establishing and maintaining productive partnerships. When it is perceived that insufficient support or expertise has been provided, a sense of lower value is generated. As the reallocation of people, equipment and time facilitates changed and improved outcomes, rethinking the way resources (human, time, etc) are deployed works to achieve alternative, and potentially more beneficial strategies and outcomes.

Managing time and workload is a continual challenge for staff in schools and universities alike. Commitment needs to be expressed at the employer or institutional level too. Too often willing participants give of their own time and expertise in addition to their day to day responsibilities. There is a threshold to anyone’s dedication under the pressure of other commitments. For sustainable commitment, participants need to feel that their contribution is valued. This recognition may be in the form of an altered work load to accommodate partnership activities, or it may be other incentive or reward. As an example, in Australia the participation by academics in professional partnership work may be applauded by their employers but not highly recognized by the university promotion programs. It is difficult to expect participation in a sustainable manner for altruistic reasons alone (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

Professional experience programs mentioned earlier are another clear example of this. To be a mentoring teacher for preservice teachers always requires extra time, commitment and energy to fulfil the role adequately (Galassi, White, Vesilind, & Bryan, 2001). Extra commitment beyond the normal teacher duties goes virtually unrewarded in many cases (Walkington, 2004). It is preferable to integrate partnership activities as much as possible with the normal workload in order to sustain motivation and to avoid feelings of exploitation (Walkington, 2005). Incentives of altered workload and increased status are positive recommendations here.

Inspirational leadership that goes beyond traditional approaches supports the productive outcomes of partnership activity. Leaders who are visionary, who see opportunities to be gained by evaluating and changing to meet contemporary needs are required (Caldwell, 2006). Leadership that focuses mainly on management and is not prepared to take risks is likely to inhibit the potential benefits to be gained. Leaders, both in schools and universities, are required to work together as partners with aspects of shared vision if others in their institutions are going to work collaboratively and productively together.

Rewarding those schools and universities that embark on programs to develop sustainable collaborative relationships is a positive way to move forward. Having committed university staff in schools and school staff in universities, promotes professional learning that provides

status to teachers but also encourages universities to look ‘outwards’ (Prof Roslyn Arnold as witness to the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2006). The identification, communication and rewarding of best practice promotes ongoing commitment.

Traditions, resources, politics and leadership, all play a role in the development of successful partnerships between schools and universities. These are factors that are outwardly obvious in the consideration of partnership development. However, close interrogation of how people actually work together is crucial, but it often is not given the recognition required. The way individual people work (or don’t work) together influences the potential for success - individually and collectively (Beck & Humphries, 2000; Russell & Chapman, 2001).

### **Making alliances work**

While the impetus to work together may stem from individual, group or institutional initiatives, the potential for effective and mutually beneficial alliances rests upon individual participants committing to collegial and collaborative practice. However, determining this is one thing; making it happen is less straightforward. Successful alliances are not just about institutions, but emphasise the relationship between individuals. Within one institution there can be many perspectives and beliefs because it is the nature of human and social interaction to be so. In university-school connections, the differences can be striking. The goals, philosophical approaches and ways of work vary a great deal. It is not unusual to hear and read about criticisms that teachers have of university academics and vice versa. These tensions are sustained by institutional and traditional practices (Gore & Gitlin, 2004) and therefore need to be explicitly addressed in order to value what each partner has to offer.

Key principles for success focus on the employment of both clear organisation and open dialogue, developing supportive professional relationships between the participants. Many potentially sound alliances have floundered through lack of clear communication and shared expectations. Identification of the expectations and outcomes for each participant early in the relationship establishes a shared beginning (Walkington, 2004). True collegiality requires recognition of what is important to each partner (Marlow & Nass-Fukai, 2000). Put simply, what of value will I get out of this? Negotiated understanding of goals and strategies sets the scene for success.

The purposes of university and school professional roles and the ways in which educators enact them are different, yet they have many educational goals in common. Important principles for effectively working together are therefore respect for the expertise and experience of other participants and a desire to gain increased understanding – a stance of humility that acknowledges there is much to learn from one another. Developing a relationship where all participants are considered equal requires explicit attention to the knowledge, perceptions and viewpoints of one another and a respect for one another’s professional dignity.

Working together; sharing, reflecting and constructing together creates a validation of partners as equals (Marlow & Nass-Fukai, 2000). Developing ownership in an alliance enhances commitment and satisfaction and grows as participants perceive a personal and professional interest in the outcomes of the alliance. Democratically negotiated expectations and goals provide for equitable decision making and reduce perceived ‘power’ differentials that have traditionally been perceived. Taking turns to chair meetings, record progress,

initiate communication etc displays a sense of impartiality and respect for one another's contributions.

When participants have a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, their motivation to proceed is heightened. They are more likely to 'put their hands up' for future involvement in enhanced partnership participation. The types of issues in need of initial discussion and continual monitoring include those relating to agreed views of purpose, methods of inquiry, roles and strategies for feedback, reflection and evaluation. One project can produce different outcomes for the individual partners. For example, some action research in a classroom may improve the teacher's day-to-day practice of teaching literacy, and therefore pupil learning; at the same time understanding of literacy teaching for the teacher educator in the university is increased.

Commitment is also promoted through respecting and adapting to the cultural and organisational ethos of other participants. This may be as simple as meeting in a teacher's classroom where innovation is happening rather than a meeting room somewhere. Willingly fitting in around timetables and other professional commitments demonstrates flexibility and a desire to work together. The allocation or re-allocation of time and resources enhances participant satisfaction. For example, participants need to meet regularly to share ideas, experiences and sometimes simply to network. If time and resources are not provided to allow this to happen, dedication will quickly turn to indifference under the pressure of competing priorities. Organisational issues may seem peripheral to the main tasks, but they can undermine the commitment and the overall effectiveness by detracting from the desired outcomes.

To develop the kind of relationships that underpin productive professional learning partnerships, buy-in by the appropriate leadership is critical (Millwater & Yarrow, 2001). An appropriate leadership approach values shared decision making and responsibility, and shared reflection and discourse, while at the same time openly displaying a sense of accountability, caring and advocacy. Leadership commitment also attends to the specific and practical factors of making partnerships happen. For example, when educators play a role in a partnership institution, the provision of office space may appear an incidental consideration, but such pragmatic detail indicates a great deal about valuing participation. Increased resource provision can be seen as a reward for commitment to joint activity. Vision is required at the highest level to address the structural needs of productive school-university partnerships. While the nature of interaction between individuals is critical, so is the nature of the direction of education employing authorities, universities, government and the like.

In the USA, the development of formalised partnership school (and professional development school) agreements has demonstrated some broader mutually beneficial outcomes (Clark, 1999). Based upon preservice teacher preparation, these partnerships have sought greater involvement in the programs by school personnel, and have evolved to include joint ventures around professional learning and research. However, even in these partnerships, the results are variable; the more successful partnerships being those where overt attention is paid to establishing and maintaining the relationship between the people involved; where the benefits are perceived to be reciprocal; where a culture of working together is fostered, and teacher growth is seen as a continuum through pre- and in-service professional learning. In particular, the 'glue' that binds the successful partnerships is the explicit and committed provision of the necessary resources and structures to support the educational activity.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst universities and schools have maintained a connection for a long time, traditional relationships between the two require re-examination to reflect upon the nature of benefit currently being gained by both partners. Evidence of research suggests that the potential for greater benefits goes unrealised in the majority of settings. It has been the aim of this paper to draw attention to the potential for enhanced professional learning that can be capitalised upon through a more collaborative relationship: where the expertise and experience of the staff is identified and utilised to provide mutual benefits.

Being a teacher/educator is a lifelong journey of continual learning. Experience and expertise is developed in context providing unique understanding, knowledge and practice. The failure to capitalise on this denies access to valuable learning opportunities for current teachers and teachers of the future. However the identification of this unique expertise and knowledge does not occur without conscious evaluation and planning. Visionary leadership is required to encourage the engagement in partnerships that focus upon creating opportunities that differ from practice currently in place. Greater success results from programs that are embarked upon jointly.

Successful programs and projects that involve partnerships between schools and universities are not new, however many fail to maximise the possible benefits for all involved because the focus is narrow and is based on traditional practice. Explicit moves to do things differently, to create opportunities based on recognition of expertise, experience and knowledge, is conducive to more productive professional learning. It is more effective when there is a sense of commitment gained through the recognition of the personal and professional benefit.

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