

Investigating International School/University Partnerships: Some highlights of the 2002 ECU/Joondalup District Study Tour



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Many Australian teacher education programs are under pressure in a competitive market to strengthen the links between their coursework and professional practice. In 2001 the School of Education at Edith Cowan University (ECU) and the Joondalup Education District established a teacher-education partnership (Compact). The broad aim of the ECU/Joondalup Compact is to develop quality teacher-education opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers, school and district administrators, and ECU teacher educators. As part of the ongoing collaboration in the Compact, a group of university and district personnel conducted a study tour in October 2002 to the USA and Canada. The general purpose of the tour was to strengthen the Compact's capacity to offer quality teacher-education opportunities by engaging with other educators involved in innovative university/school partnerships.

This paper, which is based on the study tour report, focuses on three noteworthy examples of school/university partnerships in the USA and Canada. Included are some observations and suggestions that aim to stimulate discussion and possible actions to support the continuing development of the Compact, and inform other teacher-education programs.

Professional practice: a changing landscape

Teacher education students consistently report that professional practice plays an invaluable role in their preparation for the teaching profession (Aitken & Day, 1999; Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Shen, 2002). This encouraging sentiment is expressed in a context where many countries, such as the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia are experiencing increasing shortages of teachers. Further, access to professional practice schools known to have high quality programs is becoming increasingly competitive (ECU School of Education Report, 2001).

Against this background, many teacher education courses in Australia are being challenged to reform their professional practice programs. The Report of the Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales (Ramsey, 2000) suggests that there should be a shift from the notion of "practicum", to the concept of "professional experience"

where workplace learning is integrated with academic preparation and educational studies. The Report identified a number of key themes, including the importance attached to practicum by education lecturers and students, the desirability of maximising the amount of time students engage in the practicum, the importance of an effective and close partnership between the university and the school, and the importance of the 'whole school' context of the practicum.

The concept of partnership based teacher education has notable currency in Australia at present. Cherednichenko & Kruger (2001) make the case for this model, and argue that partnership based teacher education constructed as collaborative practitioner inquiry has the potential to change and improve the practice of all participants - students, teachers, student teachers and teacher educators. Key to their model is a focus on the learning needs of the school students. They observe that when the partnership is developed on this principle, the traditional separation of propositional and process knowledge is challenged and clearly defined roles are inappropriate.

Partnership based teacher education requires substantial changes in how schools and universities operate and relate to each other, and will affect the entire organization and curriculum of university courses and the practices of academics (Carpenter, Cherednichenko, Davies & Kruger, 2000). Beck & Kosnic (2000) stress the importance of the involvement and commitment of the university teaching faculty in the practicum for strengthening school university partnerships and the enhancement of both the practicum and campus program experience for students.

Mullen (2000) supports school and university practitioners finding innovative and meaningful ways to develop professionally as colleagues. Marlow and Nass-fukai (2000) describe true collegiality as that which involves ongoing professional interaction from a position of trust, and where each colleague is respected for his or her own unique contribution to the whole. They describe two essential elements for the development of collegiality as the building of strong relationships and the validation of colleagues as equal.

In sum, the changing landscape of professional practice in teacher education in Australia is characterised by increasing pressure on teacher education programs to produce more quality teachers in a context where resources are dwindling and the expense of programs is increasing. It is apparent that partnership based teacher education is the way forward.

The ECU/Joondalup Compact

In response to the changing landscape of professional practice, in particular the "Ramsey Report" (Ramsey, 2000), and a range of other factors, ECU's School of Education has embarked on a process to reform its teacher education programs. One of the major innovations associated with this process was the establishment in 2001 of a teacher-education partnership between ECU's School of Education and the Joondalup Education District - the ECU/Joondalup Compact. The broad aim of the Compact is to develop quality teacher-education opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers, school and district administrators, and ECU teacher educators.

Developing better relationships and a sense of a learning community between the schools and the university is key to the partnership. The principles of the Compact are focused on enhanced outcomes for children, teachers and the school communities through:

- enhanced learning for children as the focus of the school -university relationship
- reflective inquiry that connects practice and theory
- student teachers, mentor teachers and teacher educators working together as 'learning partners' in the authentic context of schools, to better understand and enhance teaching and learning
- teaching in all aspects of the course constructed so student teachers become researchers of their own practice
- opportunities made available for schools and student teachers to pursue collaborative curriculum inquiry, curriculum development and teaching practice investigations.

Two new teacher education programs were launched at ECU's Joondalup Campus in 2002, namely a Bachelor of Education (Kindergarten through Primary) course and a Graduate Diploma (Middle Years) course. These courses have significant features which relate to the development of partnerships with schools, particularly in their professional practice components.

Traditional supervisory roles are changing within the Compact. University and school staff work collaboratively to establish roles and responsibilities. Teachers are considered to be mentors rather than supervisors. University teaching staff play a more supportive role as colleagues in connecting the theory with the practice. The Compact encourages schools and student teachers to pursue collaborative curriculum inquiry, curriculum development and teaching practice investigations. Krieg & Sharp (2003) provide more detail on how the Compact is developing collaborative inquiry in practice.

The Compact Study Tour

As part of the ongoing collaboration in the Compact, a group of university and district personnel conducted a study tour in October 2002 to the USA and Canada. The general purpose of the tour was to strengthen the Compact's capacity to offer quality teacher-education opportunities by engaging with other educators involved in innovative university/school partnerships.

The study tour aimed to do the following:

- deepen our understanding of how school/university partnerships can contribute to children's learning outcomes
- examine different models of professional teacher-education development, especially in terms of transference of skills to the classroom, and sustaining collaborative partnerships

- deepen our understanding of the mentoring relationship between the assistant (student) teachers, mentor teachers, and university colleagues, particularly with reference to the collaborative development of quality teachers and improved learning outcomes for school children
- provide ideas for planning the future direction and development of the Compact
- establish networks and dialogue with international colleagues engaged in similar types of innovative university/school programs
- foster international publication opportunities
- strengthen collaborative relationships between ECU and the Joondalup district
- further develop common research interests within the Compact and with international colleagues.

Based on the study tour's objectives, a set of seven focus questions guided the group's enquiry into teacher-education partnerships. The group met regularly throughout the study tour to discuss their observations and perceptions in relation to these questions, and to develop a set of recommendations associated with the latter.

This paper, which is based on the study tour report (Albones, Dawson, De Jong, Sharp & Treasure, 2002), describes three significant examples of school/university partnerships encountered in the USA and Canada. The paper highlights some of the group's observations, and presents recommendations associated with these examples. It aims to stimulate discussion and possible actions to support the continuing development of the Compact, and inform other teacher-education programs.

Lesson Study

The group visited Mills College which is an independent college for undergraduate and post-graduate courses in education. It is situated in Oakland, California and enjoys a fine reputation across the US as a small college producing exceptional and dedicated teachers. The Mill's program is guided by the overarching goals of equity and social justice. Community building, collegiality and commitment to urban education are strong features of the program. The College aims to place graduates in disadvantaged schools around Oakland. These schools have high proportions of African American, Hispanic and immigrant children.

San-Mateo Elementary School is one of many schools in Oakland, which has a partnership with Mills. The study group had the opportunity to view a "lesson study" demonstration conducted by classroom teachers at the school. "Lesson study" is a form of research lesson, and is taught to classroom students by their own teacher or a visiting teacher. According to Lewis and Tsuchida (1998), the concept embodies the following special features:

- they are observed by teachers who are usually in the school, and/or from other schools in the district. Observers may include outside commentators
- they are carefully planned, usually in collaboration with one or more colleagues. In some cases strategies are pre-trialed, discussed and modified before the study lesson is conducted for the group

- they are focused, usually on a particular goal or vision of education, such as helping students to become “active problem solvers”
- they are recorded. This could include video or audio-taping, narratives and/or checklist observations. This is usually focused on the issue of interest
- the observers are instructed to focus on children’s learning rather than the teaching process
- the observers discuss the research lesson during a panel discussion. The presenting teachers give feedback first, followed by the observers’ comments and questions.

The study group was impressed with the collaborative practitioner inquiry that characterised the lesson study, particularly as it reflected Cherednichenko & Kruger (2001) assertion that partnership based teacher education constructed on this principle has the potential to change and improve the practice of all participants. The group observed too that the lesson study focus on children’s learning is of particular significance, as this is a principle of the Compact.

With some modification, the lesson study concept could provide a professional development model for mentor teachers and assistant teachers in the Compact schools. An adaptation of the concept has the potential to:

- encourage collaborative teaching strategies and collaborative planning and reflection
- support the development of assistant teachers in the Compact
- assist the development of mentoring processes and professional development of new and experienced teachers within the Compact
- facilitate the development of workshop materials (eg. video, the development of processes and print materials) that can be used for the professional development of teachers within the Compact and in university teaching courses.

Carnegie Academy for the Advancement of Teaching (CASTL)

The study group visited the Carnegie Foundation in Menlo Park, California. The Foundation is an independent institution which aims to strengthen teaching and learning in America’s colleges and schools. A major focus of the Foundation’s projects and programs is the development and enhancement of teaching as a scholarly work. A good example of this theme is the Foundation’s CASTL K-12 program (the Carnegie Academy for the Advancement of Teaching program) which was launched in 1999 with funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation. The centrepiece of this program is a national fellowship project that brings together outstanding K-12 teachers (Carnegie Scholars) who are committed to documenting their own teaching and sharing their work with others. CASTL aims to render teaching public, subject to critical evaluation, and usable by others in the field. The program seeks to assemble a diverse group of scholars with complementary interests, strengths and experiences. They are teachers who:

- have been involved in previous efforts to research or document their work
- are currently engaged in studying their own classroom practice

- are committed to sharing their learning with a broad audience, beyond their local school and community (through a book, article, website, CD- Rom etc) (Shulman, 2002).

The most interesting aspect of the CASTL program is the opportunity it offers for the sharing of innovative and exemplary teachers' work, and its encouragement of practicing teacher research. CASTL's use of information technology as both a tool for research, and the presentation and sharing of good practice was impressive. It has great potential to contribute to offering quality teacher-education opportunities, especially in university/school partnerships. Ideas for initiating and modifying this program for the ECU/Joondalup Compact include:

- the opportunity it provides for research by teachers for teachers
- the recognition, encouragement and support for exemplary and innovative teachers to share their work
- the identification of exemplary teachers by curriculum managers, the district director, and Compact university teaching staff. Teachers could be invited and supported to participate through the Compact working party
- setting up templates for teachers to use multi media to display their work and to assist them with technological support
- using the Compact website as a site for these electronic displays
- investigating various funding opportunities to assist and encourage and support teachers' involvement (eg. QTP, Centre for Excellence)
- the opportunities for ECU to make use of current, relevant and local good practice to inform its teaching programs
- an opportunity to encourage and share research in middle schooling
- finding a technology supplier to sponsor the project.

With the above in mind, the Compact plans to investigate a process for identifying, encouraging, supporting and displaying the work of exemplar teachers within Compact schools. Some of the processes required include:

- setting up a process for the identification and support of exemplar teachers to undertake research and/or to record and present their work
- investigating funding opportunities to support a visiting scholar from the Carnegie Academy in San Francisco (CASTL project) to assist in the development of the website display, assist in the development of a template to suit the Compact's local needs and support teachers in the use of such a technology template to describe and display their work
- ECU staff exploring ways in which this work can enhance ECU's teaching and learning programs.

The Cohort Model

The study tour included a visit to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). The Institute is one of the largest faculties at the

University and one of the largest faculties of education in North America. A key feature of the mission of OISE/UT is the development of partnerships, an example of which is the cohort model that is used to organise the Institute's one-year postgraduate pre-service program. Below is a summary of the program and key elements of this model:

- the program consisted of a cohort of approximately 1300 student teachers, 600 of whom were in the elementary stream (K-8)
- the elementary stream was divided into cohorts of about 65 students, each with 2 coordinators and its own faculty team of approximately 4 staff
- the coordinators were responsible for the design of the program and set their own schedule and timetable
- each cohort, while required to follow a set of curriculum criteria, had developed an identity of their own, or a particular focus. For example, some of the foci included community building, the arts, and information technology
- a feature of the cohorts was the development of a strong, collegial relationship between the students and staff
- each of the coordinators dealt with about 10–12 schools. They took responsibility for all communication with schools and placements of students. Relationship building with schools was considered to be critical to their success
- each cohort developed their own model/timetable of practicum placements. For example, in the Midtown model students were required to do two 4-week blocks of practice teaching during the year, each in a different school. Prior to each block, students spent 1 day per week in STEP (Student Teacher Experience Program) in the classroom where they did their practice teaching. The combination of STEP and practice teaching constituted the practicum.
- five or more student teachers were clustered in each school.

Many of the key elements of this model are closely aligned with the principles of the new Joondalup programs. According to Beck & Kosnik (2002) the following features of the cohort model are noteworthy:

- faculty staff become the “student advisors”, the focus being on building relationships
- it is possible to experiment with different approaches and avoid duplication and superficiality in course content
- better integration of course content and fieldwork is possible
- common understandings are developed between the schools and the university cohort staff
- it provides more opportunity to support assistant (student) teachers
- evaluation of the assistant teachers is conducted by the mentor teachers and this has strengthened their ownership of the program and increased the time and effort they devote to it

- all members of the faculty team, including subject specialists, are required to do practicum supervision. This promotes team building and refinement of program philosophies across the whole program
- support in the form of evaluation rubrics, guidelines and procedures are developed by the team and provided to faculty and school staff
- in-service sessions are provided for mentor teachers, and regular liaison meetings occur between representatives from all partner schools
- faculty staffing is enhanced by seconding practising teachers into the program as these teachers bring both recency and credibility.

The number of student teachers at ECU Joondalup is set to increase considerably over the next five years. For example, numbers in the Bachelor of Education (K-7) have doubled from 2002 to 2003. Associated with this trend are many challenges facing the Compact. How does the Compact develop its own community of learners, an important principle of the partnership between the University and schools? Does the University maintain a small core of university lecturers, and second school personnel to provide recency, credibility and teacher education expertise? If so, how can this be resourced? How do ECU staff maintain responsibility for coursework teaching, liaise with schools and develop significant relationships with students and associate teachers?

The OISE/UT cohort model offers some attractive possibilities to address these concerns. Central to the development of such a model for the Compact is:

- the provision of adequate staffing and resources
- strengthening of relationship building in the first year by affiliation with a defined cohort of students and a university colleague. For example, tutorials will be organised by cohort, and social gatherings will be arranged by cohort
- the possibility of a cohort that is geographically determined, and is based on a central school site instead of the University campus.

Concluding comments

The ECU/Joondalup Compact is still very much in a formative phase. As a model for teacher-education practicum, it embraces a conceptual framework that strives to be responsive to the challenge of ensuring quality professional practice in a context marked by dwindling resources and increasing competitiveness.

The Compact principles reflect key concepts such as ‘learning partners’, ‘collaborative inquiry’, and ‘mentoring’, capturing the ‘flavour’ of educational partnership. In practice, applying these ideas is complex and challenging. Looking to the collective wisdoms and exemplars of good practice in other contexts is one way of developing capacity to address the latter. The study tour has certainly provided a myriad of learning experiences for the Compact. We believe that the three innovative examples of partnerships described in this paper demonstrate how some of the aims of the study tour are in the process of being met. Our understanding of how school/university partnerships can contribute to children’s learning outcomes has been enhanced through the “Lesson Study”. The “Cohort Model” offers a potentially useful

way of addressing resources issues in professional practice, while the Carnegie Academy provides many ideas for recognising exemplary practice, and providing opportunity for research by teachers for teachers. Above all though, we are confident that the outcomes of the study tour will contribute substantively to planning the future direction and development of the Compact, and the national debate on addressing teacher-education challenges.

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