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Goriss-Hunter, Sellings, P., Lenk, K., & Scash, M. (2021). A fine romance? Developing a Transformational School-University Partnership. *Educational Practice & Theory*, 43(1), 57–76.

<https://doi.org/10.7459/ept/43.1.05>

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A Fine Romance? Developing a Transformational School-University Partnership

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Abstract

This paper investigates the complexities involved in a school-university partnership between a secondary school, Highview College and Federation University, both located in Australia. The authors argue that Federation University and Highview College have worked together to develop a transformational partnership in a Community of Practice (CoP) that has benefits for both parties. The authors report the findings through the analogy of a relationship unfolding.

Using a qualitative methodology, it was found that through the development of a transformational partnership, a number of benefits had eventuated. These benefits include authentic learning experiences and the raising of university aspirations for school students.

Keywords: school-university partnerships, pre-service teacher education, Communities of Practice

Introduction

Throughout initial teacher education (ITE) literature, school-university partnerships have been construed as desirable (Brady, 2002; Rowley et al., 2013, Green, Tindall-Ford, Eady, 2020). In ITE literature as

well as tertiary education and school sectors, there is an interest in the ways that school-university partnerships are constructed and how they might work to support high quality ITE programs. However, this kind of partnership is not formed by a simple connection, it is what could be termed a complex, multi-layered and potentially charged relationship. There is a history of conceptualizing school-university partnerships in terms of relationships (Brady, 2002; Lemon, Wilson, Oxworth, Zavros-Orr & Wood, 2018.) The paper expands upon this notion as the authors argue that through the often complex interactions between school and university and an emphasis on the relational aspects of the partnership, a Community of Practice (CoP) was formed.

This paper seeks to identify and describe the development of a school-university partnership that moved beyond a transactional meeting of two educational institutions to a transformational connection in a CoP. To do this, the authors add to the framework of a CoP, the analogy of a relationship, exploring the development of the partnership in terms of the interactions that occur as relations are established and events unfold. This structure is foregrounded from the **Setting up the Partnership** section onwards in order to explore how relational elements inform and impact upon the establishment and development of the partnership. Anecdotal writing from the authors and quotes from the teachers interviewed are threaded throughout the paper and are used in an attempt to capture the emotional states and relational work significant to the points being made. In order to investigate what all the members of the CoP actually thought about the particular school-university partnership we are involved with, the authors have employed a qualitative methodology. To be accountable to stakeholders, the research design includes structured interviews with college teaching staff and leadership as well as reflective feedback from teachers and academics involved in the partnership CoP.

Literature Review

Due to the nature of the project with a focus on learning and teaching in contemporary education systems, the authors draw on literature in two main areas – school-university partnerships with a focus on transformational relationships and CoPs. The research we conducted revealed that these fields intersected and interacted in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways.

Partnerships.

Traditionally, as part of initial teacher education programs, universities have instigated partnerships between universities and schools, with the needs of the university often at the forefront of such partnerships (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Partnerships that are set up in such a

manner, often only meet the needs of one stakeholder rather than all parties (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Such partnerships can be referred to as transactional partnerships (Butcher, Bezzina & Moran, 2011; Teitel, 2008) as they allow at least one party to achieve their goals, but do not lead partnership organisations to change the manner in which they work (Teitel, 2008). Transactional partnerships are now being seen as less than ideal, with researchers such as Flynn, Pillay & Watters (2015) suggesting that partners must provide mutually beneficial outcomes where traditional boundaries of partnerships are crossed. Reid (2017) and Walkington (2007) suggest that innovative collaboration is needed between universities and schools as this can lead to enhanced outcomes for teacher education candidates.

According to Walkington (2007), truly collaborative school-university partnerships have shared goals as well as open and honest communication so that each partner can see the benefits for their organization. Kayser (2011) suggests collaborative partnerships need more than open communication, highlighting three behavioural goals of commitment, character and authentic communication and three structural features of sharing goals, accountability and interdependence. These key features of collaborative partnerships (Kayser, 2011) contrast sharply with those of traditional transactional partnerships (Teitel, 2008) as all partners are required to show more commitment, better communication and accountability so that the goals of all partners are met.

If the key features of collaborative partnerships espoused by Kayser (2011) are implemented into a school-university partnership, the partnership can be termed as transformational (Butcher et al., 2011, Teitel, 2008). Teitel (2008) describes transformational partnerships as ones where the success or failure of the project are a joint responsibility. Butcher et al. (2011) states that parties involved in such a partnership must be open to change and that each organization involved in the project must value the strengths of the partnership and nurture these strengths through communication that is open and honest. When such transformational partnerships are developed between schools and universities, the connections forged between the partners allow a long term meaningful relationship that has the potential to facilitate significant change in each organization involved in the partnership (Teitel, 2008). Amerein-Beardsley and Barnett (2012) agree that there is a need for quality partnerships between schools and universities stating that such connections must 'develop educational partnerships based on the unique needs of each school and most importantly, on a foundation of shared goals and trust' (p. 115).

Innovative partnerships between universities and schools are becoming more common with Reid (2017) describing a collaborative model where pre-service teachers (PSTs) and school communities focused on exploring authentic issues that were affecting their local school communities. Reid (2017) reports that there were clear benefits for all participants (school leaders, teachers, pre-service teachers) citing that school leaders found benefit in teacher development assisting them to meet school improvement objectives. Teachers gained a better understanding of their own leadership capabilities and a range of perspectives on classroom learning whilst pre-service teachers gained an opportunity to understand the leadership and teaching that is practiced in a school environment.

Similar to Reid (2017), Lemon, et al. (2018) describe the importance of strong partnerships between school and universities suggesting that partnerships are multilayered and complex. Lemon et al. (2018) present their findings as 'lines of partnership' (p. 85) highlighting the intricate nature of partnerships and the diverse needs of members of the partnership as well as espousing the benefits for pre-service teachers in terms of their professional identity formation and the creation of enhanced links between theory and practice.

Significance & Benefits

The importance of school-university partnerships has been identified by researchers including Lemon, Wilson, Oxworth, Zavros-Orr and Wood (2018) who report on developing partnerships that reshape the experiences of initial teacher education candidates. Carter (2012) reports that initial teacher education students need to be viewed as partners in any collaboration between universities, schools and the school community so that these students can be inducted into schools in a manner that promotes professional growth. Prieto, et al. (2015) investigated the effectiveness of a quality teaching framework, highlighting the need for initial teacher education candidates to reflect on learning experiences from placement and the reported usefulness of this. These three research projects show the need to form partnerships that respond to the needs of the university, schools and the initial teacher education candidates so that outcomes enhance student learning in a manner that best prepares each candidate for the teaching career ahead.

Strong innovative partnerships could be one way that could ensure the desired outcomes for candidates in initial teacher education courses. In the next section, the notion of Community of Practice (CoP) is explored as it is a vitally important aspect of the transformational school-university partnership explored in this paper.

Community of Practice (CoP)

A Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) is a well-known concept regarding groups that share interests and values. The term 'CoP' has come to refer to a group of people with shared values who work together on projects to fulfil common goals. CoPs can grow organically from the members' shared interests or they could be constructed in order to gain specific knowledge, skills or outcomes in a particular area.

The concept of the power of collective learning and participation in shared projects fuels and sustains the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, CoPs develop networks of social interactions and relationships that impact groups and communities outside the individual CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Kezar and Gehrke (2017) posit that 'social networks and CoPs are related to situated cognition theories of change that suggest changes, learning, and improvement occur within organizations as individuals on the ground engage with others' (p. 325). In general, the University-School CoP has produced professional and social networks that seek to promote learning and effect change by collaboration in activities and collegial conversations.

Methodology

Qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured interviews and reflective feedback from teachers and academics were employed in order to explore the complexities of the research topic that comprised individual experience, professional practice and negotiations of secondary and tertiary education systems. Eleven Highview College teachers out of forty-five teaching staff were interviewed. The qualitative interview attempts to ascertain both the facts and any underlying meanings relevant to the participant's experiences (Kvale, 1996 & McNamara, 1999). Semi-structured interviews were used in the research project as a more personal way to obtain information as the authors could work directly with the participant, asking follow-up questions or probing for more information where the need was perceived. Using this method coupled with the researchers' knowledge of the secondary school and staff, the interviews became 'Conversational encounters to a purpose' (Powney & Watts, 1987, p. vii). Pseudonyms have been used when referring to or drawing on information from school teachers who participated in the research interviews.

The second part of the method in this research was the reflective feedback from teachers and academics involved in the partnership. This method of investigation, often in the form of discussion or conversation, offers opportunities to reflect on what has been learned and the learner's performance (Schon, 1984, Cantillon & Sargeant, 2008). Re-

reflective feedback also promotes critical reflection, self-focused assessment and, as a result of these approaches, enables the practitioner to develop and improve using a facts-based procedure (Cantillon & Sargeant, 2008). The researchers use reflective feedback to examine their beliefs and assumptions about the ways in which school-university partnerships operate and also as a means of working towards innovative change in the field of teacher education.

The research team comprised two academics and two school staff from Highview College. In this paper the research team will be referred to as Researcher 1, Researcher 2, Researcher 3 and Researcher 4. The research team regularly emailed and met formally in university classrooms and also, as the partnership developed, informally, in locations external to the school and university. During these email exchanges and meetings, planning occurred for events like the annual activity days, 5 day placement, pre-service teacher volunteering opportunities, teacher Professional Development days, and new education opportunities. Upon completion of the interviews, project team members listened to the transcripts together which assisted with the identification of themes; the analysis of data; and, the writing up of the findings.

The qualitative framework of self-study and semi-structured interviews enabled the research team to maintain a steady focus on self-reflection as well as supporting a strong analysis of the partnership to see whether it was working for the benefit of all parties and also, how it could be expanded and enhanced. As a result of this emphasis on reflection and analysis, within the research project, a range of learning and teaching processes were consistently foregrounded while they were constantly examined from the different standpoints of the researchers. Thus, the shared goals and values of the CoP were foregrounded in the planning and implementation of any activities.

School Context

Highview College is a regional secondary school catering for students in one of the most disadvantaged regions in Victoria. Students often have extremely limited financial capacity and many do not consider attending university as a career pathway. The school endeavours to support students to engage in learning and with the completion of schooling, the Victorian Certificate of Education.

For Highview College, the setting up of the school-university partnership was based on four main goals:

- To enrich the teaching pedagogy
- To make tertiary aspiration conceivable for the students

- Develop programs designed specifically for the needs of the students
- To promote teaching as a skilled and worthy profession

The school believed that a significant partnership with a university could assist the school community make considerable progress to meeting these goals.

University Context

Federation University is a regional university that has been educating students from regional and remote areas for many years. The School of Education is always exploring new ways to enhance the classroom readiness of its graduates with school partnerships developed to meet the following goals:

- To maintain currency regarding contemporary schooling so that courses developed prepare pre-service teachers for the rigours of a teaching career.
- To develop courses and programs designed for the needs of a diverse range of learners studying at university
- To give pre-service teachers in-school experiences to ensure that they are classroom ready.
- To explore areas of need for schools (e.g. Professional development) and develop programs that could be delivered within schools.

Just as a CoP develops from shared interests, the school-university partnership began with a shared passion for teaching and learning and the desire to provide authentic learning opportunities and activities for specific student cohorts. This is demonstrated in the shared and overlapping goals of the two organisations. From the viewpoint of the academic staff, the school-university partnership originated from a desire to engage pre-service teachers as well as students and teachers from a local secondary school in meaningful, relevant and purposeful learning activities that also allowed them to demonstrate their own learning. The activities initially developed by the partnership were shaped to cater for goals in both organisations.

Setting up the Partnership

A fine romance? – Only the beginning

‘I was cautious about the partnership. I’d been burned before.’ (Maggie, teacher).

The university is always seeking opportunities to form partnerships with suitable organisations. In particular, the School of Education continues to look for appropriate educational organisations. ‘As an academic I’m always on the lookout for authentic learning opportunities

for my students and when I heard that Highview College had contacted Federation University and was looking to form a partnership, I thought I needed to investigate further and see whether we could work together to form a mutually beneficial partnership' (Researcher 1).

When Highview College approached Federation University concerning possible collaboration opportunities, it seemed to be an excellent fit for a partnership. Initially, some of the researchers thought that the partnership would be transactional. 'When I was approached about taking on the new position of "University Links Partnerships Coordinator" ... I originally thought of it in terms of an administrative position organising pre-service teachers and little else ... Eventually, I became an intermediary contact point between Federation University and my school' (Researcher 2). Over time, the cultivation of the relational aspects of the partnership enabled the development of a transformational partnership.

Members of the two organisations met to discuss and prioritize goals. The academics and school staff who met shared a passion for teaching and learning as well as a commitment to working collegially within education systems in capacity building exercises. In these meetings, all participants agreed that a school-university partnership would be beneficial but they were all uncertain about what that partnership might look like and how it might proceed. At this juncture it became clear that some past experiences with school-university partnerships had generated negative feelings in some participants. This transactional kind of partnership was perceived by academics and teachers as limited and usually weighted in favour of the university. So, the research team felt that the connection needed to be built slowly and firmly based on mutual interests and benefits. In order to build trust and genuine connection, both sides of the partnership felt that it was important to go beyond the traditional transactional partnership model to a transformational one where mutual benefit was achieved. One participant, Maggie (teacher) stated that they felt that past experiences with partnerships had been "a one way street".

Is it a match?

I was used to working with a range of colleagues ... but I did wonder whether this would work ... how would we find the time to meet?' (Researcher 1).

When the research team investigated models of school-university partnerships, they looked towards the work of Lemon et al. (2018) that demonstrated the complexities of these kind of connections in the rich image of 'meshwork'. While Lemon et al.'s (2018) research examines the complexities of school-university partnerships, the authors contend

that in their school-university partnership, the rich level of complex communication and interactions resulted in close professional relationships developing between parties in both organisations. These close professional relationships clearly fit with Kayser's (2011) behavioural goals, suggesting elements of a transformational partnership (Butcher et al., 2011), further underlining the dynamic, flexible and fluid nature of partnerships and demonstrating the relational aspects of teaching.

Mindful of Walkington's (2007) findings concerning successful transformational partnerships involving shared goals as well as clear and honest communication, the authors began using face to face meetings, email and telephone calls to build rapport between school and university staff in order to plan short and long term goals. So, it was vitally important for both sides of the partnership to come together to form a fair and mutually beneficial partnership. This could be attained by setting achievable goals relevant to each party's unique situation; employing clear and purposeful communication; and collaborating in order to avoid the pitfalls of transactional connections. As a result of these measures, a connection was formed that identified the shared values and goals of the two groups and acknowledged the formation of a CoP as well as the transformational nature of the partnership.

The school-university partnership focused on the specific needs of each party, one of the key characteristics of transformational partnerships (Amerein-Beardsley and Barnett, 2012, Kayser, 2011 and Reid, 2017). As this kind of equitable connection was made within the framework of a CoP - with an emphasis on shared interests, benefits and practice - the partners believed that this fair and mutual arrangement would prevent the emergence of negative feelings and attitudes that had previously been experienced by both parties in earlier transactional 'partnerships'. And, with the generation of an atmosphere that was constructive and productive within a relational framework, it was felt that our working conditions and outcomes would be more positive than previously experienced.

Activities developed by the partnership

In response to the stated goals of the two partners, a number of activities were initiated. These include classroom walkthroughs (PST classroom observations); activity days where students visited the university campus; professional learning and support programs; and, placement opportunities. All activities were designed to meet the needs of both school and university with each activity having benefits for both partners. Both institutions encouraged their staff to invest significant amounts of their time and expertise in the partnership. So, instead of what could have been two different sets of goals and ideas, a shared

sense of purpose assisted the production of common aims and objectives. These shared goals and practice eventuated in a CoP. This was particularly evident when a number of conversations between academics, teachers and school leadership migrated from formal meeting rooms at the university to less formal off-campus environments and this was pivotal in shaping and planning activities to fulfil the requirements of both parties.

Transforming the Partnership

A fine romance? – Awkward first dates.

I asked to see whether we could get some volunteers because I wasn't sure but I thought the partnership might be good for that.' (Steven, teacher).

The partnership between Federation University and Highview College started at first in a very transactional way. 'It was a formal arrangement and we were hoping for a partnership' (Researcher 1). At first, emails were exchanged with formal requests for assistance. 'I had requests from staff asking about (pre-service teacher) volunteers for Athletics Days and camps. They stated, "if we've got a partnership with the university, can they help us with this?" and, I thought, yes, I'll ask, wondering if anything would actually come of it' (Researcher 2). These first tentative steps highlighted the need for open communication and commitment from both sides. Over time this changed to 'Thanks for the list of events that you need volunteers for – I have sent out the call ... and I sometimes tap pre-service teachers on the shoulder and ask ... school timetables and university schedules often don't line up perfectly. But our PSTs were always keen to help' (Researcher 1).

Similarly, when professional learning sessions were initially organised, school staff questioned the purpose of the session, concerned about the usefulness of 'free' professional learning run by Federation University staff. In the first of these sessions, staff involved quizzed the academic about why the university would run such activities. Again, this changed with later professional learning where 'staff were eager to suggest areas for future professional learning, saying that the sessions were assisting them with classroom based activities' (Researcher 3). This transformation from wariness and disbelief to understanding and confidence demonstrates the progression from the initial stages of forming a connection to the creation of a positive environment with a sense of common purpose within a CoP.

Other examples of this progression from transactional to transformational partnership within a CoP include the sharing of goals and practice that led to the development of sequenced placements that produced positive results and significant change for the school and the

university. Professional experience sees PSTs participating in a five day first year professional experience and block placements of three to seven weeks. First year PSTs participate in a five day placement where they take part in active observations and engage Highview College students in small group work. Initially, this placement was organised in the traditional, transactional way with university staff organising with the school to have these students placed. Feedback from stakeholders was important to shape this activity. This feedback was summarised as: 'The teachers and students enjoyed having the PSTs because they enjoyed the fresh faces and new ideas. Some teachers wondered if it would be better for the PSTs to shadow one teacher to get a sense of how they would work in their discipline area. Others liked the idea of PSTs seeing a broad range of teachers' (Researcher 2).

In order to work with these varied responses, the Research Team discussed possible strategies and responses. These included continuing to organise a general timetable where PSTs moved from class to class to see and work with a range of teaching approaches but also offering the opportunity of working more closely with a teacher in their discipline area. The PST would need to negotiate with the teacher in question to organise further opportunities for active observation and small or whole group teaching. It was hoped that this new approach would assist the PST with their professional development as well as streamlining the placement process for the teachers. These changes were considered as 'we thought we'd do this the way our partnership was unfolding, by seizing opportunities to interact with each other' (Researcher 1). The increased opportunities for sharing practice and expertise within the CoP encouraged PSTs, teachers and academics to critically reflect on their own teaching approaches and use an evidence-based process to improve.

The three examples show how the interactions between the partners developed over time. As the two parties of the partnership began to work together we noticed that telephone and email exchanges became less like information dumps and permission seeking and more like conversations between people who had just met and wanted to get to know each other. The transactional transformed into the transformational. Highview College supported the partnership with 'a real time commitment' as all of their School-University Partnership Coordinator's release time was compacted into one day a week 'to spend at the University for meetings, planning, writing ... whatever was needed' (Researcher 2). The academics in the project, juggled teaching, research and service commitments so that regular face to face meetings could be held with the School-University Partnership Coordinator. On several occasions, other school teachers attended the meetings. All

team members also regularly checked in via email, telephone or text regarding what exactly was required in any given situation. The school Principal acted in an advisory role and was extremely responsive and prompt in all communications. The development of the CoP, with professionals sharing their expertise and plans for the future, was fuelled by good will and a real sense of commitment from both school and university partners.

In the development of the partnership there was a deliberate emphasis on clear communication, rapid problem-solving and the elimination of ambiguity or bluntness that can occur in email-only interactions. The emphasis on open communication, as espoused by Butcher et al (2011), collaboration as emphasized by Reid (2017) and Walkington (2007) as well as the timely problem-solving signalled the willingness of the partnership to embrace change. Researcher 2 stated that:

Much of the beauty of the partnership was in the enhanced level of communication we developed. Suddenly, I knew the people behind the paperwork at the university. I could liaise with university staff regarding course requirements, forward planning and brainstorming ideas to make procedures and processes work better at both ends. I started to see things from a university perspective; the university staff increased their understanding of the needs of our particular school.

This increased understanding within the CoP was used to share practice and meet the unique needs of the partners.

The result of this shared knowledge and understanding was also evident in the everyday teaching of university courses. For example, Researcher 1 was able to add to their knowledge of current behaviour management strategies by including fresh concepts from the school teachers and these ideas were used in university course discussions with PSTs. The process of developing empathetic and emotional connections between partnership members highlights the 'lines of partnership' (Lemon et al., 2018) that reveal the complexities and range of needs contained within partnerships. And, this complexity eventuated in a flexible and responsive CoP.

The Interviews – Reviewing the Progress ***A fine romance? Its official! Going out.***

(The partnership is important for the students, staff and for the university as well. It covers a few bases.' Greg, teacher)

Through reflective feedback, members of the partnership have clearly stated what they believe to be the benefits of the school-university CoP. Pre-service teachers (PSTs) have commented through verbal

ordered sharing and written reflections that they feel that the partnership with Highview College is extremely beneficial to their development as teachers. From their reflections after the Activity Day, PSTs have been overwhelmingly positive about the partnership. One PST stated that ‘the whole thing (the Highview College-university partnership) works out well. We go in first year and then we can catch up with the students in second year and then we know the students and staff and we can go on a placement.’ Another PST stated that ‘We can hit the ground running because we get to know the students and the teachers are so helpful’. Highview College students have indicated through feedback that they enjoyed the Activity Day and various interactions with PSTs at their school, finding these activities to be engaging learning experiences. A teacher, Fran, described the school students as ‘buzzing with excitement’ after the Highview College-Federation University Activity Day. While PST and school student feedback regarding elements of the Highview College and Federation University partnership have been overwhelmingly positive, the researchers felt that it was important to investigate teachers’ perspectives on the school-university partnership.

The following themes emerged from the Highview College teacher interviews. First, the teachers discussed what they perceived to be the benefits of the Highview College and Federation University partnership. These benefits were seen to be the authentic learning experiences for school students, teaching staff and PSTs that emerged from participation in volunteering opportunities, placement experiences and recruitment.

The benefits of the regular face to face meetings and check-ins, the collegial, responsive and empathetic style of the communication, was that not only were the needs of each party clearly addressed (Reid, 2017), the partnership was developed along equitable and collaborative lines (Walkington, 2007). There was a sense that there was a balance of power and this, along with an emphasis on clear communication skills encouraged the development of empathetic relations. This development of emotional connection and empathy was mutually beneficial as it enabled smoother and more productive interactions between parties and also the discrete and sensitive resolution of any issues that inevitably arise. The CoP worked well in terms of shared ideas, values and a democratic use of power to collaborate.

All teachers interviewed commented on the positive effects of the professional experience activities involving Highview College teachers and students as well as Federation University PSTs. Two graduate teachers, Tayla and Emily, expressed the wish that they had experi-

enced the five day first year placement as PSTs as they felt that it was a good introduction to the running and structure of a working school. Tayla stated that 'From the teacher perspective: They (PSTs) put a bit of pressure on us which was good. I thought it was exciting.' The thought concerning PSTs being exposed to the day to day business of a school was echoed in a few comments from other teachers. Kylie (teacher) commented that 'it was good for PSTs to see what actually happens in the classroom' and another teacher, Steven, said that 'it's good for PSTs to see how a school runs'. The exchanges between Highview College staff, researchers and PSTs that resulted from classroom visits, activity planning and questions about school structure and pedagogy felt like the early stages of a relationship where each party is eager to get to know the other and there can be a real charge of excitement in 'learning new things about each other and developing a solid professional relationship' (Researcher 2). This way of managing the partnership was certainly an enjoyable means of ensuring that the unique needs of each party were addressed by responsive and clear communication in collegial collaboration (Flynn, Pillay & Watters, 2015). The creative and practical interactions between school and university created and sustained a positive and rich learning environment in which feedback and understanding formed the basis of a dynamic and pragmatic CoP.

A significant number of the Highview College teachers mentioned recruitment as a benefit of the school-university partnership. Laura (teacher) stated that the professional placement was 'good for attracting staff.' Both PSTs and teachers could work with each other towards a common end to see how they might fit into a school or teaching team. All of this could occur in a safe environment within the clear frame of placement and assessment rubrics. Communication between parties was usually clear and direct with common goals outlined. This produced a shared sense of purpose that was evident in some comments. For example, Greg (teacher) stated 'The PSTs were part of an intense ... planning program'. And Demi (teacher) commented that they 'worked as a team'.

Highview College teachers expressed the notion that they benefited professionally from working with the PSTs with regards to their motivation in general; curriculum planning; and, teaching. Most of the teachers made comments concerning an increase in motivation that occurred after working with or interacting with the PSTs. Several teachers perceived the interactions with PSTs in the light of professional learning as these experiences sparked teacher reflections on their own pedagogy. Kylie (teacher) considered working with PSTs to be 'Good for me too, I get to reflect on my own teaching. You see what other people

are doing; seeing the theory come out of uni being put into practice'. Another teacher, Sue, commented on the enthusiasm and energy that the PSTs brought to their teaching. Sue said that 'their energy is a big positive; (their) engagement and participation and this rubs off on me'. Another Highview College teacher, Laura, commented that the PSTs also fully participated in the whole school wellbeing program to the point where 'they became part of our Pastoral Care team and they offered input for us as well.' In a similar vein, Maggie (teacher) focused on the innovative aspects of working with PSTs as practicing teachers are often seeking to retain their currency and/or looking for innovative new ideas regarding curriculum design and teaching approaches. Maggie stated that 'PSTs are trying to impress me, and they give me new ideas, new examples of technology – then I share with the whole faculty'. So, working with PSTs was perceived as a way of promoting self-reflection on practice and keeping in touch with developments in different fields of teaching and learning as well as technology. And, this new knowledge was able to be shared with other teachers throughout the school, ensuring that working with PSTs could be quite an effective professional learning experience for the Highview College teachers. These comments highlight the effective sharing of practice that occurred on a number of levels within the CoP.

Activity Day

From feedback and anecdotal evidence, it is apparent that the Highview College Activity Day forms strong working relationships in a specific and annual CoP that includes secondary students, teachers, PSTs and academics working together at that particular time. It assists with developing and implementing quality initial teacher education and authentic learning experiences. Organising the Activity Day, communicating with stakeholders and designing engaging curricula are all tasks that are carried out by the PSTs within the framework of rich assessment tasks. Highview College teachers worked with the PSTs to describe the context of the school and suggest ways of framing and developing relevant, purposeful and engaging learning experiences. Both Highview College and Federation University have diverse student populations with significant cohorts from non-academic and/or disadvantaged backgrounds. The similarities in contexts meant that PSTs were able to draw on their own backgrounds and prior knowledge to explore ways of constructing relevant learning tasks that were meaningful to the Highview College students. A number of Highview College teachers are actually Federation University graduates which has strengthened connections between the school and the university. One of these Federation University graduates, Emily, stated that 'Having participated in a similar activity day as a PST at Federation University myself only a couple of years ago, it was a surreal feeling experiencing the day

from my new perspective as a qualified teacher. Our Year 8 students had a fantastic time exploring the University and it gave the PSTs a chance to showcase all that they have learnt thus far in front of an enthusiastic audience. It was a beneficial day for all involved.'

The Activity Day provided the secondary school students with the opportunity to experience a university campus. The teachers involved could participate in and observe teaching approaches and activities developed by the pre-service teachers as well as gaining an understanding of some of the university opportunities available to their students. Pre-service teachers gained valuable experience in teaching small groups of students with the opportunity to implement some innovative teaching approaches. The activity day experience also normalised the university for a cohort of students who traditionally do not undertake tertiary study as well as having the effect of encouraging any aspirations that they may have for further higher education study.

The reflective feedback from students, PSTs, teachers and academics indicates that participation in the Activity Day confirmed that the school-university partnership had, in fact, formed a CoP with shared values, goals and practice that used critically constructive feedback and capacity building exercises to develop authentic learning and teaching experiences. The CoP worked to enable students, teachers, PSTs and academics to fulfil common goals, share expertise and provide opportunities for shared practice and reflective feedback which, in turn, promoted critical self-assessment and an evidence-based process to foster improvement.

Challenges

A fine romance? The honeymoon is over.

'We need to overcome challenges so that the partnership continues to flourish.' (Researcher 3)

There were a number of challenges and future development areas mentioned by the interviewed teachers. In terms of curriculum planning and teaching when students were on placement, teachers stated that it was sometimes difficult to relinquish control of what would be happening in their classes. This was typified by the comment from Kylie that it was sometimes difficult to 'leave the pre-service teacher to teach'. Another area Gary highlighted as a challenge was that the 'Pre-service teachers can be focussed on their own goals rather than having a broader understanding of teaching life' and 'at the end of placement, there are many loose ends that they (PSTs) cannot wrap up'. This highlights that placement experiences, while authentic, are not the same experiences as an ongoing teacher would have. The classroom walk-

throughs also provided some challenges for teachers. Several teachers suggested constructive changes to classroom walkthroughs including ‘there needs to be a focus on why certain things happen in a classroom’ and ‘could pre-service teachers follow one teacher for the day?’

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges was the initial obtaining buy-in from school staff to support the partnership philosophy. For example, one of the first partnership activities, Professional Development (PD) sessions for the mathematics faculty, had some difficulties, at first, in attracting participants. In the first instance, school staff questioned the usefulness of a ‘university expert’ and also why the professional development sessions had no cost attached. However, after the PD was conducted, the academic running the sessions was found to be reliable, punctual, relevant, and helpful with follow-up. They have since maintained on-going contact with the mathematics teachers, instilling a sense of trust in them. In school evaluations of this PD within the partnership program, the new Head of Mathematics explicitly requested this aspect of the partnership to continue which evidences the credibility and usefulness of the university’s PD sessions.

The challenges discussed in this section show that even within a CoP that foregrounds common values, goals and sharing practice, issues may arise that need collective problem-solving approaches.

Future Directions

A fine romance? Will you be mine?

(‘Yes. Let’s do this.’ Researcher 4)

It is anticipated that the success of the Partnership will continue to expand and evolve in the future. The possibilities are extensive and the shape of the program continues to be flexible and open. In the future, students entering Year 11 could undertake their Orientation in residence at Federation University in November each year. Further professional development opportunities could be offered. And, the Activity Days are being expanded to include a collaborative curriculum writing project that was trialled and successfully received in 2019. These activities will re-affirm the shared values, goals and practice of the CoP as well as allowing members to expand the group in the implementation of change.

Conclusion

A fine romance? We are family.

‘This Program has been of immeasurable value in assisting to shift our pedagogy to high-performing and student-centred.’ (Researcher 4)

‘The partnership is altruistic and benefits both parties.’ (Researcher 1)

Through our paper, the researchers have demonstrated that our school-university partnership is transformative with ongoing benefits for both parties and has grown into a CoP. From the initial perception held by some stakeholders of this connection as a traditional transactional model, Federation University and Highview College have worked together to develop a transformational partnership that has evolved into a CoP through the mobilization of shared goals, values and practice. Both parties have worked collaboratively on projects including staff professional development, pre-service teacher placements, Activity Days, and a range of opportunities for volunteering and classroom observations. Teachers, students, academics and pre-service teachers have acknowledged the benefits of the partnership which were seen to be the authentic learning experiences for school students, teaching staff and pre-service teachers that emerged from participation in the CoP.

The paper shows how a school-university connection, based on shared values, goals, practices and professional relationships can work as a CoP and develop from a transactional network to a transformational partnership. It is the strong and responsive CoP and the professional relationships that form the bedrock of the Federation University and Highview College partnership. While more research is needed in this area, the authors argue that working in CoPs and relational factors – common goals, values and practice as well as clear communication and collaboration – are key elements in establishing transformational partnerships in general. Given the manner and nature of the development of the connection, the authors proclaim that the Highview College and Federation University partnership and CoP has indeed become ‘A fine romance!’

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