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LEADING CHANGE IN TEACHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA THROUGH UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

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Abstract

Recent government reviews of higher education in Australia have highlighted the need for comprehensive reform across the tertiary education and training sector. Teacher education has traditionally been offered in isolation from schools. Innovative partnerships between universities, schools, employing bodies, and other educational institutions are now encouraged. This study evaluates the impact and effectiveness of one university-school partnership between an Australian university and a large secondary college in Canberra, Australia. The partnership, titled the Down South initiative, embeds secondary teacher education within a College learning environment to bring together academics, secondary college students and teachers, and pre-service teachers for learning and research. The paper provides evidence of the effectiveness of the partnership in strengthening pre-service teachers' professional identity, knowledge and practice and by contributing to mutually reciprocal outcomes for all.

Keywords: Secondary teacher education, university-school partnerships, learning

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1. Introduction

The need for comprehensive reform across the tertiary education and training sector has been highlighted in recent government reviews of higher education in Australia. With the release of the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008) in Australia, the sector entered a new stage of significant change as universities positioned themselves for ongoing growth over the coming years. This provided the impetus for universities to develop new initiatives and form partnerships with schools, corporations, community organisations and members of the wider community. Holland and Ramaley (2008) provide a rationale for the change:

Our educational institutions are beginning to work together and interact in different ways, both internally and externally, to create research and educational environments that are easy to traverse and responsive to the changing knowledge and skill needs of a global, multidisciplinary, collaborative, and evolving community landscape in order to address the challenges of life in the regions we serve (Holland & Ramaley, 2008, p. 33).

The Review also recommended a 'less prescriptive regulation' with 'more opportunity for higher education institutions to develop their own character' (Davis, 2010). Consequently, universities have sought to develop new initiatives and equity pathways to widen participation and respond more actively to changing government agendas.

The effectiveness of teacher education institutions to prepare pre-service teachers for future learning environments has been a central focus for discussion for some time. There has been acknowledgement of the need for teacher education programs to be revitalised through the adoption of innovative approaches that better prepare pre-service teachers for schools of the 21st Century (Brown et al., 2002; ACDE 2004). Research related to the nature of quality curricula, teaching, learning, and pedagogy (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Gale & Densmore, 2003; Spencer, Riddle, & Knewstubb, 2012) and an emphasis on the facets of process-learning, including community-based learning, problem-based learning, collaborative and network-based learning, have also increased the pressure for change. Ongoing Commonwealth and state enquiries or initiatives in Australia (Ramsey, 2000; MCEETYA, 2003; Commonwealth Parliamentary Standing Committee's Inquiry into Teacher Education, 2005) and the recently introduced National Framework of Professional Standards for Teachers (MCEECDYA, 2011) and Teacher Quality Framework have increased the scrutiny of teacher education programs and provided further impetus for change.

Traditional approaches have usually offered university teacher education courses in isolation from schools and have been constructed around professional experiences related to observation, teaching practice and reflection. For many pre-service teachers the practicum is the first opportunity to re-enter the classroom after completing their school studies. In contrast,

the immersion of graduates, some of whom have had careers outside teaching, in the Down South initiative is designed to enhance their understanding of educational theories, philosophies, professional performance and effective learning strategies within an authentic learning environment. As pre-service teachers, they are able to engage within their future professional environment in ways that are more likely to encourage greater confidence, judgment and wisdom. Through the development of a deeper appreciation of the context and practice of the teaching profession, direct interactions and dialogue with staff and college students, the pre-service teachers are more likely to develop a stronger sense of professional identity, not previously expected until late in their early years of teaching in schools.

2. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of one university-school partnership between a multi-campus Australian university and a large Catholic secondary college situated in Canberra, Australia. The partnership, titled the Down South initiative, embeds secondary teacher education within a College learning environment to bring together teachers, academics, college students and pre-service teachers to create multi-dimensional layers of interaction for learning and research. The focus of the evaluation is to ascertain the effectiveness of the program design and implementation processes, the way in which the program might be improved, and the way in which the program might enhance initial teacher education programs. The initiative draws on the theoretical perspectives of the communities of practice model, transformative learning and life-based learning. The research is predominantly qualitative and utilises some mixed-mode methods to capture formative and summative evaluative processes, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys. The focus is on the improvement of program design and implementation.

3. Context

A university-school partnership was formed in 2011 between the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Canberra and a Senior Secondary College situated in the Tuggeranong Valley of Canberra. The partnership, commonly known as the 'Down South Initiative', sought to provide a new model of secondary teacher education in which pre-service teachers, enrolling in a Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) course, would have opportunities to engage in authentic learning experiences that reflected the reality of the everyday classroom and school. The partnership brought together University academics, College administrative and teaching staff, pre-service teachers and secondary school students, to create a dynamic community of practice (Wenger, et al. 2002) for professional learning, teaching and learning,

and research. Of importance was recognition of the need to ensure the contributions of all participants were valued in the process of bringing about positive change and improvement.

Currently, there is no higher education institution on the southern side of Canberra and it is expected that, over time, the partnership will raise the profile of both the College and the University through further opportunities for growth in the region. The development of this initiative is timely and responsive to the challenges identified in the Bradley Review (2008). It aligns with the Australian Government's agenda to lift aspirations and heighten the expectations of school students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to consider university study as a possible educational pathway in the future. The presence and interaction of pre-service teachers with senior college students on the College Campus is expected to be a motivator for the students in deepening their understanding of what it means to be a university student.

Inspiration for the 'Down South Initiative' came from the Gloucestershire Initial Teacher Education Program after the University Secondary Education Course Coordinator visited the University of Gloucestershire and St Peter's High School, Stroud in 2009. With the motto 'train the best to retain the best', the GITEP school-based program operates with approximately one hundred and fifty postgraduate secondary pre-service teachers and thirty-five primary pre-service teachers. The program of initial teacher education within a continuum of professional development through partnerships and in schools is regarded positively.

4. The Process

A Steering Committee comprising representatives from all stakeholders was formed in 2010 and began preparation for the formation of the partnership well before implementation. The Steering Committee determined the scope and objectives of the partnership, arranged course offerings, consolidated mentoring networks, established a framework for the facilitation of university student access to professional learning opportunities at the College, introduced the induction of university students into the professional life of the College, and organised the mechanisms for professional dialogue between the members of the partnership.

The ongoing presence of the College-based Coordinator and University Course Coordinator was pivotal to course cohesion and implementation of the program. Evaluation of all aspects of the program was regarded as a priority and strategies included both formative and summative processes. Appropriate induction processes were undertaken and pre-service teachers engaged in the normal Early Career Teacher Orientation Program offered at the College, including the analysis of Mandatory Reporting procedures, ITC Acceptable Use policy and a range of policies, procedures and protocols specific to the College and campus.

Regular briefings with the Campus Head were held for the purpose of clarifying Campus and College events, protocols and procedures. The pre-service teachers received copies of College newsletters, bulletins and notices and also attended College assemblies, masses, liturgies and briefings. They were given the opportunity to engage in a series of lectures presented by 'experts' in several fields from the University, CEO, Systemic schools and the Board of Senior Secondary Studies on: the College Ethos; Integrated Curriculum; Tactical Teaching; Student Management; Study Wiz; On Line Applications; Senior Studies requirements; MOLE applications; Legal Responsibilities and Duty of Care.

Pre-service teachers were linked to pastoral teams and met each week with the Pastoral Coordinator and team for a short briefing. They received minutes of the meetings. Following this, they attended morning Pastoral Care class with their assigned Pastoral teacher and then attended either the Pastoral program or a Campus assembly. The pre-service teachers were also linked to Faculty teams in their main teaching specialisation and attached to a Faculty Coordinator. They were invited to attend Faculty meetings and received Faculty minutes if unable to attend. The pre-service teachers also had the opportunity to observe six classes in their specialisation during Term 1 and six classes in a specialisation other than their own in Term 2 of the school year.

5. Teaching and learning

The teaching program was timetabled each week for Tuesday and Wednesday at the main College Campus with some further study time allocated throughout the week for the mentor- teacher sessions across the various curriculum specialisations. Some mentor sessions were conducted at the main College Campus while others took place at the University or other College site. University staff delivered the core teaching program.

Semester One and Two, 2011

In Semester One, 2011, two units: EDFD548 Effective Teaching and Professional Practice and EDFD546 Learning and Learning Development, were offered to pre-service teachers at the main Campus. A mixed-mode pedagogical approach was adopted to enhance the learning opportunities available to pre-service teachers. Six University lecturers, one sessional teacher and thirteen teachers from the main College and other Colleges were involved in delivering lectures and mentor sessions. ACU pre-service teachers were attached to the various Faculties. This involved thirty teachers.

In Semester Two, 2011, two units EDFD547 Diversity in the Classroom and EDFD543 Social and Cultural Contexts of Education were offered at the main Campus. Pre-service

teacher assessment tasks were integrated with the observations of classes and students at the College. The pre-service teachers were again attached to the various Faculties. This involved twenty-five teachers. In Semester 2, the pre-service teachers were assigned two students from their pastoral class and were required to write a pastoral report under the guidance and supervision of their Pastoral teacher.

For most pre-service teachers, the Professional Experience component of the course was completed at schools other than the main College to ensure a diverse range of learning experiences was provided.

Pre-service teachers had access to the College network and also used their own notebooks or laptops. This reduced the pressure on the College to provide a space to allow access to computers and ensured links were maintained to the University library and other networks. The pre-service teachers also had access to a computer laboratory and the library outside lecture times. While initially the use of technology for teaching provided some challenges, these were satisfactorily resolved.

6. Evaluation of the program

The outcomes of this qualitative study provide evidence for the effectiveness of the initiative to not only strengthen pre-service teachers' professional knowledge, practice and engagement but to also support the emergence of their professional identity through critical reflection and transformative learning. The paper also highlights some of the challenges and changes that have occurred through the development and implementation of this initiative.

Evaluation prior to 2012

University pre-service teachers and mentors

Focus group interviews of pre-service teachers and mentor teachers revealed there were reciprocal benefits for both groups. The students stated that they believed they were having a genuine experience of school. This enabled them to keep their goals in focus. The link between theory and practice was evident in the relationship between lectures and observations of classes. The correlation between secondary pre-service teacher education and school strengthens the learning experience and pre-service teachers believe they will be better prepared. This was evidenced in the confident manner in which they approached the practicum.

The process of enculturation into the professional setting gave them a familiarity with the staff and the staff room so that it became "a relaxed and safe place" and they felt part of a community. Interactions with the students were facilitated through membership of the Faculty

and pastoral care teams. Pre-service teachers went from being fearful of adolescents to finding “the students fantastic”.

Secondary college staff

Focus group interviews revealed that the partnership has provided opportunities for the formation of positive relationships between the University and College staff and for dialogue, collaboration and input to occur in an ongoing and authentic way between the College and University in regards to teacher education. The initiative provided College personnel with the opportunity to engage in positive professional learning about the nature of teacher preparation; the teachers were able to critically reflect on professional practice through dialogue with pre-service teachers, lecturers and mentors.

The opportunity for teachers to act as mentors and to deliver lectures as College-based ‘experts’ to pre-service teachers was regarded as a very worthwhile professional learning experience, as was the dialogue that occurred between students and pre-service teachers; for Year 12 students, this created opportunities to see university as a desirable pathway.

Evaluation of program 2012

Further evaluation conducted in 2012 supports the general tenor of comments made in 2011. The eighteen members of the focus group reported on statements relating to the course content, college curriculum and also college amenities. The response to statements covered the span of No1: Strongly Disagree to No 5: Strongly Agree. Intermediate response strength was No 2: Disagree; No 3: Moderate and No 4: Agree. The statements were:

College context (1-6)

- Observations of College practice, processes and protocols contributed to an understanding of expectations of professional practice.
- Involvement in the Pastoral Program activities highlighted the importance attached to Pastoral Care of the students in the College.
- Participation in the College Assembly gave me an insight into this mode of communication and celebration of College life.
- Orientation was helpful in preparing for the professional experience component of the course.

- Delivering the University curriculum in a school context provides a rich and real experience to pre-service teachers.
- Being immersed in a school context provides an understanding of the expectations and demands placed on teachers.

College curriculum (7-11)

- The number of observational lessons prescribed for pre-service teachers is sufficient to develop an understanding of classroom teaching and management.
- Attending the Faculty meetings facilitated an understanding of professional practice.
- Lecturing and mentoring sessions delivered by the College staff were useful.
- Guest lecturers were informative and useful.
- Teachers at the College were cordial, helpful and resourceful in sharing information.
- College amenities (12-14)
- ACU classroom facilities at the College were satisfactory.
- Amenities including refreshments, restrooms, and car park space were satisfactory.
- IT facilities were satisfactory.

7. Findings and discussion

The outcomes from the 2012 evaluation were overwhelmingly in the Agree or Strongly Agree category apart from comments about Amenities.

Table 1. Results of the 2012 evaluation (n=18)

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree %</i>	<i>Disagree %</i>	<i>Moderate %</i>	<i>Agree %</i>	<i>Strongly Agree %</i>
1			10	40	50
2		10	30	50	10
3		5	15	45	35
4			15	45	40
5		10		40	50
6			5	40	55
7			25	25	50
8		5	15	35	45
9		5	15	30	50
10				45	55
11		5	15	15	65
12	5	5	20	50	20
13			10	55	35
14	15	15	15	40	15

As College Amenities (Statements 12-14) opinions relate only to local physical arrangements, this analysis is concerned only with those issues relating to the course itself; i.e. College Context (Statements 1-6) and Curriculum (Statements 7-11). Satisfaction ratings for these responses (Statements 1-11) gave an overall strength of support as:

Table 2. Overall satisfaction ratings

<i>Response</i>	<i>Raw No. n=18, statements = 11</i>	<i>Proportion of possible %</i>
Strongly Agree	89/198	45%
Agree	73/198	37%
Moderate	28/198	14%
Disagree	8/198	4%
Strongly Disagree	0/198	0%

Agree and Strongly Agree support was 82%, clearly a positive overall response to the course. Apart from several negative comments, as mentioned, relating to logon arrangements, computer internet connection speed and type of furniture in the room, all other comments; i.e. all those relating to course content and presentation, were positive. In some instances a double tick was recorded at the Strongly Agree level. A selection of comments follows:

- Observations of students at the school were a key part of the course
- Tutorials great as they gave ideas for engaging students
- Opportunity to observe very useful
- All staff were helpful
- Observations gave insight into classroom teaching and management
- Some teachers are overworked!
- Aspects of this course distinguish it from other universities
- Context invaluable for preparing for practical authentic experience
- Beautiful collegiate environment among staff and students
- Great to meet and hear personal insights
- Getting to ask questions of people (in these positions) was beneficial
- The PC leader got me involved
- I'm not a fan of school assemblies but these were good!
- Thank you for having us at the College
- A chance to meet some parents would have been great
- Being at the school helped in understanding the high school system

- One pre-service teacher regarded the time allocated for Religious Education as insufficient and that more observations would be beneficial for those specialising in this area

Overall, evaluations reveal high levels of satisfaction with the program and there is evidence of positive impact on both the University and College, including staff, pre-service teachers and students. The change has increased the confidence of the participants and provided increased opportunities for purposeful and professional interaction, mentoring, career prospects and leadership.

8. Conclusions

Ongoing changes in higher education will no doubt bring further challenges to those across the sector. To survive and maintain relevancy, there will be an increased need to employ innovative strategies that respond to the changing needs of the community. The 'Down South' initiative has focused, with apparent success, on the development of a strong university-school partnership to enhance and provide authentic learning opportunities for all involved. With an approval rating by the pre-service teachers of 82%, the initiative is clearly fulfilling a need. Future directions require careful construction, theorising and more research-based evidence to ensure the outcomes are sustainable and mutually reciprocal.

As there is little research specifically focused on the impact and effectiveness of partnerships to bring about positive change in teacher education, a research development cell is in the early stages of formation at the College and a working party has been convened to monitor and expand this important work to build organisational capacity across both the College and University.

This small evaluative study provides evidence that strong university-school partnerships have the potential to revitalise teacher education programs and to more effectively prepare pre-service teachers for future classrooms. This secondary education initiative enables pre-service teachers to engage more proactively in contemporary learning environments and thereby be more likely to emerge from their professional experiences with greater confidence, wisdom and judgment, and a deeper appreciation of the context and practice of the profession.

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