Abstract

It is almost one hundred years since Dewey stated that the purpose of research in all its forms and disciplines was an “effort to understand and help others understand what teachers and learners do during the process of learning and what this means potentially for the education of teachers” (Dewey, 1904/1974). Early in 2003 the author of this paper began a research study that investigates the development of relationships between teacher mentors and preservice teachers. The aim of the study seeks to examine the extent to which the concept of community of practice influences the construction of professional identity through the situated learning of preservice teachers in selected school settings. Associated with this aim is to identify the potential for communities of practice to address the anxiety of teachers in the context of seemingly overwhelming levels of change in education and society affecting their professional roles and identities right now. Ironically the researchers found that the anxieties of teachers actually affected their efforts to entice schools and teachers to be involved in the study. This paper focuses on this first stage of the research study. It examines the dilemmas experienced by the researchers as they endeavoured to encourage schools and teachers to participate in the research. It raises issues about the relationship between academics in teacher education and schools and how we can facilitate teachers’ involvement in future research in schools.

Introduction

Much has been written about the benefits of research partnerships or collaboration to reform both teacher education and schools (eg McIntyre et al., 1994; Yeatman & Sachs, 1995, Grundy, 1996). However gaining cooperation from schools often proves difficult. As Olds and Wolford Symons (1990) explain “the culture of schools is inherently unique and complex” (p.96).

The conditions that exist in the participating institutions can adversely affect collaboration (Peters, 2002). Dawson (1995) cites two factors of difficulty: the different valuing of practical and theoretical knowledge by teachers and academics; and the distribution of power among participants. As Peters (2002) argues, the conditions and assumptions that underpin efforts to form collaborative projects with schools are significant to understanding how to make them more effective. Olds and Wolford Symons (1990) added that the variations between the working environments in which the two groups of professionals conduct their business can also contribute to difficulties. As they explain, the “structured and student centred” day of the school professional contrasts with the more flexible time and “less daily focus on immediate student needs” of the academic (1990, p96).

This paper tells a story that may be all too familiar to qualitative researchers whose main interest is in researching with teachers. The research project – termed Communities of Practice – is currently being completed. It investigates the influence of specific school settings and mentors on the development of preservice teachers’ professional identities. The schools and teachers approached for the study had already committed to our practicum programme. Through this basis for seeking school involvement, the researchers hoped their collaboration in the teacher education practicum would lead them to collaborate in researching that involvement without too much difficulty. In this paper we examine the realities of that all-important stage of a research project in schools - convincing teachers to be involved.
The Study

The ‘Communities of Practice’ project is currently being completed. It is a qualitative case study research project initiated through a 2003 Griffith University New Researchers Grant. As explained, the schools were approached because they were already involved with our Faculty of Education’s professional practice program. Nine of the ten are government schools - five secondary and five primary.

Teacher educators are aware of the integral role of professional practice in influencing their students' development towards becoming teachers. We are conscious that our students speak about becoming a teacher differently once they have had professional experience in the school setting. The difference could be described as a depth and variety of representations of teachers’ work that preservice teachers use following from their school experiences. Lave (1991) argues that the professional practice experience is an accepted model of “situating learning in communities of practice”, and learning is seen as a process of changing participation in the community of practice.

Wenger (1998) suggests that individuals form their identity through belonging to communities of practice. Grisham et al. (1999) in their study of professional development school projects across a number of sites identified how a community of practice approach to professional development benefits both the preservice and the experienced teacher. Teachers in their schools help preservice teachers learn the profession. Preservice teachers in turn bring new ideas, viewpoints and practices into classrooms. The aim of our study seeks to examine the extent to which the concept of community of practice influences the construction of professional identity through the situated learning of preservice teachers in selected school settings. Associated with this aim is the identification of the potential for 'communities of practice' to address the anxiety of teachers in the context of seemingly overwhelming levels of change in education and society affecting their professional roles and identities right now.

The evidence we collect will include the kinds of learning activities and representational practices found in particular school sites (the communities of practice) during a major professional experience of approximately twenty preservice teachers. The ‘representational practices’ refer to the sets of experiences that occur bringing the preservice teacher into the particular community of practice and at the same time aligning them with shared meanings that are needed to pursue the common endeavour of teaching.

To align with the “community of practice” focus of the study it was important to the researchers to establish a “community of inquiry” with the schools and mentors. As Stenhouse (1976, p. 143) argued, “It is not enough that teachers’ work be studied; they need to study it themselves”.

Priorities for the research process

The first experiences of university researchers as they strive to establish research in schools can demonstrate where and how schools and teachers position academics in their communities of practice. Health researchers Olds and Wolford Symons (1990,p.96), described the importance of “conduct” for researching in schools for

…higher education professionals must work closely with public school professionals rather than in isolation from the “field environment”. The
complexity of this relationship has the potential to create obstacles for school health researchers, particularly those who are not “citizens” of the school community”.

This notion of being “not citizens” is powerful in its placement of researchers as ‘outside’ – foreign - to the school community. As educational researchers there is no difficulty in seeing ourselves as part of a broad professional community. However for those of us who wish to work face to face with teachers and students in schools, the notion of being “citizens” raises questions about the power of individual communities to accept or reject research and academics. This would mean that members accept ‘research’ as part of the ‘culture’ of that community. In the Griffith study, the schools involved had accepted as part of their culture the responsibility of preparing new teachers to the profession. This was a “way in” for the researchers. However to enable our research to become accepted as part of the community, two priorities emerged in our early involvement with the teachers, schools and preservice teachers. These can be summarised as:

1. engaging with the participants as collaborators in the research; and
2. creating a place for “outsider” researchers within the school community

The experiences examined in this paper consider each of the priorities at the point of establishing teacher and preservice teacher participants in the research. The initial phone conversations with schools, first interviews with teachers and preservice teachers, and the researchers’ journal entries are used as evidence in this section.

Engaging with the schools as collaborators in the research

As researchers we believe that one of the most effective way to provide a quality teacher education program is to continue to investigate factors that influence the school based experience – or practicum - component. Such research is best conducted in the schools. To gain access to the schools and the mentors, researchers need to be sensitive to the working environment of the participants. We were aware of the role that structural conditions in the school would play in terms of being able to develop a collaborative approach in the teachers’ workplace. Minimising the intrusion of the research into the teachers’ and preservice teachers’ normal daily work was an important factor in the project design.

In developing the proposal seeking university funding, it was essential that the project meet the conditions set out by the University. This of course requires a well laid out methodology and justification for the project occurring in a timeline that often precludes approaching participants to be involved at the point of the research proposal. As Grundy (1996) has highlighted, to establish a professional community of inquiry – one in which the different expertise of the research partners does not eliminate the crucial element of democracy – is problematical. University conditions can contribute to the problem.

For the Griffith study, the research aim and key questions were established prior to confirming all participants, as was the methodology. The proposal for the collection of data included semi structured interviews with preservice teachers and then with mentors prior to the commencement of the block practicum, followed at the end of the practicum by a second interview. These we planned to audiotape. Then throughout the four weeks, discussions between mentor and preservice teacher as they progressed through the four weeks were to be
audiotaped – conducted by the mentors – not the university researchers - in each school. The researchers provided the resources - recorders and tapes - to each mentor. Data would also include any school/ teacher documentation characteristic of that which is given to preservice teachers, including written feedback on notes of lessons taught and observed. Finally each mentor and each preservice teacher would maintain a personal reflective diary on their experiences in their respective roles during the time in the school.

As with all research projects the appropriate information and consent forms were prepared for each school and individual participant. Approval from the employing authority, and university ethics approval were sought and gained.

So having successfully fulfilled all the organisational and ethical requirements of University grants, the researchers were ready to seek out ten schools with teacher mentors who would be willing to collaborate on the project. As explained, schools who had already agreed to have at least two of our preservice teachers for their block practicum were approached for the study. This meant that these schools had taken on the mentoring of preservice teachers under their own initiative, not through any pressures from the project researchers. It was intended that there would be a total of 40 participants across the ten schools –consisting of preservice teachers and their mentors.

Timing became critical. This project was tied to the dates of the practicum block for preservice teachers, and this factor led to some anxious times ahead. Delays in the university ethical clearance process had led to a limited timeframe to finalise the participants. We needed the school and mentor agreements before we could approach any preservice teachers. In this way the difficulties of true collaboration are obvious. A hierarchy was established. The important first collaboration needed to be with the mentors. Without their agreement there was no point in approaching the preservice teachers. Finalising participants and ensuring their continued participation - as many researchers wishing to work with teachers would recognise- is one of the most anxious parts of research.

We intended a three-step procedure for finding our school based researchers – the mentors - and this is where the structural conditions of the schools play a key role in affecting collaborative research (Hargreaves, 1994). As a matter of protocol we needed our research to be approved by each school Principal. However we knew this would occur if we had the support of each School Practicum Co-ordinator, who generally is a Deputy Principal. These people are familiar with the University as they are the ones who are involved in all communications about the practicum placements. In talking on the ‘phone with these people the researchers were met with either absolute support as one Co-ordinator put it “ I think this is really important ”; or an emphatic rejection, as in “No – the teachers have enough to do – they have no time for this”. For those giving the first response, the second step began. Without the university researcher going to the school, the co-ordinator would take the proposal to the mentors to let them decide if they wished to be involved.

At this point, the written information about the project is important in the process. The researchers were yet to meet face to face any of the potential participants. All information had been started with that phone call to the school practicum Co-ordinator. If supportive we immediately followed this with a facsimile of the information. This was a letter to the Principal, two pages explaining the purpose and the involvement required for the project and the consent form – which included a place to indicate when we could come to do the first interview. Allowing for about a one week time period – we then rang back. It is at this point
the realities of being collaborative began – as did a sense of how differing expertise and perceptions needed to be managed carefully in order to support a collaborative approach.

Overall we contacted fourteen schools in order to finally gain ten schools where mentors agreed to participate in the project. The tenth school – a primary school – was quite keen to be involved but first semester was already committed to a major literacy project. As this data gathering would be confined to one school, the researchers agreed, given their keenness, to continue the data gathering into second semester with that one school.

Collaboration with participants became essential to effectively carry out this research. To recognise the teachers as researchers there needed to be space to negotiate with them. Grundy (1996) acknowledges that the generation of a project’s research questions within the school context is an important component of collaborative approaches. However the structural requirements of funded research often precludes this as in our case. Fortunately this principle was not problematic. The difficulties emerged in relation to the methods of data collection. Negotiation on these became the basis of moving towards a more collaborative approach, but in doing so it also implied a particular relationship for us within the school community.

Creating a place for “outsider” researchers within the school community

Communication of data became a means for participants to negotiate their positions as researchers in the project. These negotiations occurred as the third step in the process of establishing our participants. We had offered to the School Coordinators that we were prepared to visit the schools at a time of their convenience. We received invitations to visit seven of the schools. This visit we had hoped could combine both any additional explanation needed plus the first interview for the project. For five of those seven schools this was not to be the case. Communication with the remaining three schools was negotiated through electronic mail – and this is the ‘tool’ that was preferred by these mentors for their first interview.

Finding time in schools to have any visitors - and particularly researchers (that sense of not being part of the community became obvious to us at times) - was clearly a source of tension for the mentors and for school administrators. For the five schools the visit was brief (about 30 minutes) with the group of mentors. In two of these schools the preservice teachers were also at the meeting. So we were able to speak with all who would be researching with us. In one school, the School Practicum Coordinator stayed as well. Her enthusiasm for the research project was clear. As a result the mentors and preservice teachers in that school demonstrated a positive approach also. However when discussion turned to the need to interview them regarding their roles and expectations¹ organising another visit seemed difficult to manage. As researchers we wanted to create a view of our role as being flexible, one that appreciated that the nature of the teachers’ daily work was considerable different to our own. Our role in this community of inquiry had to ‘fit in’ with the majority. Given the development with the remaining three schools in the study we suggested that they might like to communicate their responses through email. This was the pattern in all the schools except two. Mentors and preservice teachers seemed much more relaxed with this idea. Possible reasons may be that it was less intrusive and disruptive as they could choose when to “have the interview”, and possibly they could give more thought to their responses.

¹ The interview was guided by three questions: how would you describe the knowledge needed to be an effective teacher? What are the most important influences on what you currently know about teaching and why?
Clearly the nature of this tool for data gathering will need to be examined in the findings of the study. It could be argued the face-to-face interview allows for more spontaneity and thus a richness or naturalness in the responses. However email communication may enable a continuation of clarification of ideas that might be possible in a time restricted.

The preservice teachers in this research project could also be perceived as outsiders of the community. Finding their space as collaborators in this project does expose the hierarchies inherent in researching in schools. Once the mentors had agreed, we needed to explain the project to all of the preservice teachers placed with these participating mentors, and to convince them that their contributions were equally important to the project. However, by being preservice teachers, their position in the school community was one that was yet to be determined by each site – the very aim of the study. Thus creating a space for them as researchers in the project was one that needed to be dealt with carefully.

Gaining their collaboration on the project was less difficult than that with the teachers. All of the preservice teachers had been visiting the schools one-day per week since March. Thus they knew their mentors. As a result, by the time we contacted them, they were aware of the project and that their mentors had agreed to be involved. Again we communicated initially with them by phone calls followed by either meeting in person, or emailing the information – depending on students’ access. We organised personal interviews to explain the project and as for the teachers, gave them the option of responding to the first interview as an electronic communication. All took the latter choice. They were aware of their vulnerable position in schools, as their mentors were also their evaluators. However we assured them that we had taken that into account in our design of the study. For example we emphasised that during their practicum it was not their role to remind their mentors of the data they should be gathering. Overall most were excited and could see a benefit to them in the project. They felt they would be given possibly “more” attention than otherwise because of the project’s focus on the feedback they receive on their teaching.

For four of the preservice teachers their agreement was less immediate. In itself, this reservation and their reasons for it reflect a particular sense of not yet being part of either community - a community of practice or of inquiry. They were not comfortable as yet in their school setting and thus the research project exacerbated their feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness. One male preservice teacher simply reserved his decision until he was in the first week of prac. He wanted to have time to talk further with his mentor. On seeing him at the school on a visit to deliver the tape recorders, he confirmed with the researcher he would be involved. He felt much more relaxed having spoken with his mentor and in his words “I know now from the consent form that I can leave the study at any time”.

A female preservice teacher responded that as her mentor had agreed, “I guess I have no choice”. She was worried about added workload as a result of her involvement in the study. The researchers assured her that she certainly did not have to be a part of the project – even though we would value her contributions – and that we certainly had no intention to add to the practicum workload. We would simply collect any material given to her – in written feedback or documentation if she was agreeable. The taping of her feedback sessions would be the responsibility of her mentor. She seemed assured and we followed up with an email for the first interview.
The final reluctant preservice teacher initially said ‘no’ when contacted by us. The phone conversation raised our concern regarding the preservice teacher’s description of his early experiences already with the mentor. We therefore contacted the university tutor who worked with this student and others in campus tutorials. This was out of concern for the preservice teacher not for the research project. There was a sense that this student felt unsupported – as he said, “I don’t think my mentor wanted to have a preservice teacher”. Thus imposing the research into that relationship was to him most unsuitable and he wanted no part of it. What is interesting for us as researchers is that when visiting that school to explain the project to the mentors, his particular mentor had been most keen to be involved. So the “community of practice” for the preservice teacher was not a welcoming one even before the block practicum began. Eventually this preservice teacher withdrew from the course before the practicum began. The mentor on hearing the news – and being disappointed in not therefore being able to participate in the project for this practicum – commented “I frightened him away”. This particular mentor has indicated that in the event that she has a preservice teacher in second semester, she would be happy to collaborate with us. We intend on pursuing that.

One final and important part of identifying our place in the research occurred in terms of taping the feedback sessions. The researchers used the term “conferencing” to explain that this was related to when the mentors organised a time for some concentrated discussions with the preservice teacher on how they were progressing. The original research proposal suggested one-hour maximum a week. This worked on the assumption that some regular time is made for one on one extended discussions by mentors during the block practicum. This was not the case in any form for at least one of the schools and most of the teachers in the study indicated there would be difficulty in achieving this for any great length of time. With the advice from the teachers it was agreed any opportunities they found to tape their discussions would be taken. We would provide the tapes and we offered to deliver tape recorders if the school did not have any. Most felt they would be able to tape something for us. We supported them in any effort they could make to collect this data. The conferencing tapes, we explained, were a means of gathering evidence of the needs of the preservice teachers and of the styles of explanations that mentors most commonly used.

In one school only was it made clear to us that they did not agree to the audi-taping of their interviews or the conferencing. However they did agree otherwise to be involved. Again this tested our priorities in doing this research. We could indicate that without the audiotaped conferencing we would not want them in the project. We determined that to negotiate with them was a means to move them towards seeing themselves as researchers as well as teachers.

The meeting with this particular group of teachers emphasises the complex nature of each school community and the way that impacts on researchers as outsiders. At the visit it became obvious to the researchers that there was a misconception on the part of the mentors that the decision that they would be involved had been made by “others”. Both the body language and words indicate that two of the four mentors present were not happy, and one actually said that she “thought she had to do this”. This had resulted from being told by the School Coordinator originally about the project. Thus we very quickly assured all of them that if they wished to withdraw from the study they could although we hoped that they would agree to stay and “work with us”. It was important that we made explicit to them that their collaboration was their choice and was highly valued. They did not wish to be audiotaped or to tape their talks.

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2 Griffith University has a Professional Practice Course that includes weekly tutorials leading up to and following the practicum.
with preservice teachers. The teachers at this stage never shared their reasons for this with us. However the Co-ordinator in a separate meeting indicated they wanted no hard evidence of inadvertent comments about students for legal reasons. It appeared to be unanimous decision: if one teacher was unwilling they all supported that person and all refused. We emphasised though that a record of the details of these conversations was essential but that these could be in written format. At this point one of the four who had remained silent indicated that he “had no problems with this at all and had begun the diary”. He did make the point that as far as the material he offered to us he wanted us to accept it as provided and not to come back seeking further detail from him. This suggests he may have had previous experience in working with researchers where his contribution was not accepted as such - a less collaborative and more directed approach. Throughout this meeting, the preservice teachers were present but said nothing.

Conclusions

Throughout this whole process of gathering participants for the study, the researchers became aware of the difficulties in becoming part of any school community, whether one of ‘practice’ or one of ‘inquiry’. This seemed particularly ironic in the light of the focus of the study we were endeavouring to examine. For us the community of practice encompassed ‘inquiry’. We had preservice teachers who were being guided on campus to become reflective as they learn to become teachers. Working to build the partnership seemed heavily weighted on the academic. Although now working in universities in teacher education, both researchers have years of experience as secondary school teachers. We found ourselves using this fact in our face-to-face interviews as a means to place ourselves in the community. In some instances we came away desperate for a coffee and a good whinge about the exhausting effort we were giving to building acceptance in order to do the research. As Grundy explains (1996,p.11) “the non-hierarchical recognition of differing sources and forms of expertise is problematical. But the problem is not solved by the elimination of the idea of expertise”. In creating a space for ourselves as researchers in their communities we have basically delegated responsibility. We cannot do our part in the project unless the participants fulfil their role. Yet we are not going to intrude and personally tape, interview or observe in order to collect data. We have established a trust in the capacity of the teachers and preservice teachers as researchers capable of collecting data for us.

We have been introduced in the early stages of this project to a varying acceptance of being a part of each school community. These variations may have relevance to what we find from the study in terms of the place of research within their ‘communities of practice’ that we are investigating. It is for this reason that we pursued the directions that negotiation took us as we sought our participants. The data we gather will result from the mentors’ choices not from a rigid research methodology that resisted collaborative opportunities.

Dealing with academic conventions limits fully achieving collaboration. The partnerships for most collaborative research projects are formed after the funds have been obtained (Grundy, 1996). Here lies the dilemma for university researchers seeking to use “collaborative research”. The project, although for the purpose of improving the practicum component of teacher education, is ultimately ours, the researchers. The mentors and preservice teachers have far less to gain from it than we do. We are asking participants to invest personal time. This is an imposition. We are taking a risk by remaining off-site throughout the data gathering stage, for they understandably become engrossed in the priorities of their working lives that demand their time and attention. Our relationship to the project is different to theirs.
It will be important not only to our research but to educational research generally, to identify the extent to which a qualitative study relying on collaboration can result without a strong face to face presence of the academic researcher.

References


