The problematic of developing a school university partnership program: Challenges, growth and reciprocity.

The origins of the program

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In Semester 1 2001 a cohort of 30 students began the Bachelor of Education - Primary (Graduate Entry) pilot program offered by the school of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus. This initiative saw the beginning of a successful school university partnership that is built on frequent communication, consultation and reflection. The partnership aims to present students with a teacher education program that attempts to bridge the theory practice divide.

The aim of the pilot was two fold. First it offered a teacher education program to those students who had already completed an undergraduate degree. The second aim of the program developed from the expectation that teacher education preservice programs form a nexus between pedagogy and practice so that classroom teachers engage in practice informed by what Yeatman & Sachs (1995) describe as a "more practically grounded, broadly informed theory." Thus the program aimed to develop a partnership that moved away from a hierarchical tertiary weighted model to one where there was an equal partnership between EPS and the partner schools that would be strengthened by continuing communication and liaison.

In the past, a criticism of pre-service teacher education has been and in some cases continues that the educational theories taught at university are irrelevant to the "real world" of teaching and fail to concentrate on the practical expectations of teaching. This difference between the two cultures has often resulted in strained relations between the two institutions. For example, Bullough et al (1999) argue that the division between the two cultures is the result of a lack of shared vision and no agreement between the larger issues of education. Hence, the differences serve to underscore the division between the two cultures while the similarities frequently remain unacknowledged. However, this view has begun to change particularly in the last decade with the increased dialogue between academics, employing authorities, teachers and parents.
Langdon (1999) observes that school university partnerships endorse the crucial contribution that schools and teachers play in the development of beginning teachers and acknowledge the important yet different contribution that the school and the university make to the education and development of student teachers. As such, partnerships contribute to the enriched learning environment that Cochrane-Smith (1992) argues occurs through linking

what students learn from their field-based school experiences with what they learn from their university experiences through mutually-constructed learning communities [resulting in] opportunities that are both different from and richer than the opportunities either the school or the university can provide alone (p.109).

Thus, school university partnerships have the potential for both schools and pre-service teacher education faculties to engage in renewal by working in a collegial manner in the preparation of students to become teachers. Initiatives such as these however are frequently accompanied by associated costs that threaten their continuing success. For example, Bullough et. al (1999) and Teitel (1994) warn that some partnerships are conceived in a hasty and haphazard manner, are driven by short-term rather than long-term gains and engage in little research into the costs and benefits to all stakeholders. Hence, sustainable partnerships require careful consideration and thoughtful research if they are to be effective and efficient in the long-term.

Previously, the type of partnerships that have been developed between education faculties and schools have mostly consisted of practicum partnerships. These are frequently unsatisfactory because of a lack of communication between the two partners. They are often based on the taken-for-granted assumption that schools will accept teacher education students for practicum. Because of financial constraints there is frequently a lack of communication between academics and teachers. The greater part of the communication occurs when the administration officer arranges a student placement with the school. Practicum runs the risk of being a time marked by infrequent visits by university supervisors, inadequate support to the school for "at risk" students, poor quality supervising teachers and inadequate communication of the university expectations for the practicum. The many opportunities that are available for developing strong university school partnerships are often lost and the cultural gap between school and university widens.

The Bachelor of Eduaction Primary (Graduate Entry) School University Partnership Program developed as a result of meetings in second semester 2000 with the administration team from one of our local primary schools, Queensland Board of Teacher Registration representatives and university personnel. The structure of the program includes 13 core academic courses, 2 professional studies and practice (teaching practicum) courses and an internship.

Initially four schools (All Saints Anglican School, Arundel State School, St Francis Xavier Catholic School & Varsity College - Junior School) were selected as partnership schools and practicum sites for the Graduate Entry students. When the second new intake of students began the program in 2002 two new schools, Nerang State School and Coomera State School were invited into the program. This
provided a larger range of schools from which students could select their practicum sites.

**School Experience**

Graduate Entry students are in a school for 34 days in each of the first two semesters of their program. The first fourteen days are called School Studies days that are in a seven-week block of two days per week followed by a 20-day continuous block practicum. One of the two school studies days is taken up with students engaging with focus (refer to following paragraph) teachers. The other day is spent with a home teacher in a classroom.

**Focus Teachers**

The contribution of the focus teacher is crucial to the success of this program. Focus teachers are key teachers in one of the Key Learning Areas (KLA) that students study university semester. Focus teachers are identified by the practicum coordinator in each school as a teacher who engages in best practice in that specific KLA area. At the inception of this initiative the planning team determined that the focus teacher would work with the total student cohort at their school for a one 1-hour session per week for each curriculum area. During that time the focus group teacher would conduct an observation lesson/discussion/seminar/workshop in the nominated curriculum area. The object of this withdrawal time being to provide opportunities for students to observe and discuss best practice in the various curriculum areas as well as develop a clearer understanding of how teaching theory is related to practice.

**Communication**

Effective and ongoing dialogue about issues related to this program is crucial to the success of the partnership. The type of communication used in this partnership model depends on three-way interaction with teachers, academics and teacher education students. To support this triadic partnership a Liaison person has been employed by EPS to visit schools during school study days. The Liaison person does not assess students. Her role is to maintain communication between school personnel, university personnel and students.

Meetings are held each school term between the Liaison person, school practicum coordinators, the University Program Convenor and the Academic Coordinator of Professional Practice to discuss issues arising from the program. At the beginning of each semester meetings are held with the Liaison person, Focus teachers and the academics who are teaching in the Graduate Entry program. The aim of these meetings is to set up dialogue between academics and teachers regarding the requirements of the university and school program. Fortnightly meetings are held at university between the University Program Convenor and students to discuss issues arising from the program.

The program is evaluated each year and the results of this evaluation are discussed with school
coordinators and academics. This ongoing communication encourages reflection and subsequent modifications to the program. As a result of these reflective practices each school has modified the program to suit their own particular needs.

**Strengths**

- Focus teachers report that they have developed professionally as a result of the program.
- The internship evaluations indicate that Graduate Entry students complete their degree with the same level of skills as Undergraduate teacher education students.
- Strong links between schools and EPS have strengthened through the frequent dialogue that occurs.
- A planning committee has been formed to organise teacher professional development in 2003 that will involve input by university academics.

**Challenges**

- Communication between school personnel and academics has begun to occur however this is one area that requires further work. Thus the gap between the university culture and the school culture still remains. This gap can be narrowed by overcoming the time constraints that prevent the two cultures finding a common voice. Such communication will serve to underscore the similarities of the cultures and overcome the silence that in the past has emphasised the difference between the two.
- At present this program is not financially viable in terms of operational costs to the university. As a result of the ongoing evaluation of the program significant changes have been made for 2003 that should make the make the program more cost efficient without sacrificing program quality or integrity. As well the anticipated program changes reflect a commitment to and an understanding of the importance of reflective practice. This is crucial to injecting renewed energy into the program thus ensuring the ongoing success of a long term program that can fall victim to complacency and taken-for-granted assumptions about the success of the program by key players.
- The workload for teacher education students whilst on teaching practicum continues to be problematic. Students claim that university demands clash with practicum demands. This is difficult to overcome because students are out at schools for a significant part of the semester and therefore will frequently have requirements from both sites. However, this challenge can be overcome by increasing dialogue between all participants.

This presentation now discusses the different construction of the program by each school.
References


**Varsity College and the Graduate Entry Program**

**Jan Davies**

**Varsity College - Junior School**

Varsity College is a P-12 school which commenced in 2001. There are 4 stages of schooling which constitute the structure.

2. 4-6 Junior school opened in 2002.
3. 7-9 Middle school opened in 2002.
4. 10-12 Senior school to be opened 2003, 2004 and 2005.

The college has been designed with the latest architectural features and houses state of the art facilities.
Introduction

In 2001 Varsity College and Griffith University embarked upon a partnership in trialing the Graduate Entry program. In Term 1 a collaborative decision was made by the P-3 staff of Varsity College to engage the preservice teachers in a rotational timetable over the seven weeks school experience component to offer opportunities across preschool to Year 3. It was also decided that the Head of Department would coordinate, manage and take on the role of the focus teacher in the school.

Day 1

On arrival at Varsity College the Graduate Entry students were greeted with an information session which included an overview of the program, an introduction to the P-3 philosophy and their roles and responsibilities whilst a member of staff at Varsity College. Each preservice teacher was given a package of information on day 1 which included an information booklet compiled by the HOD (Head of Department), school rules and policies, eg. playground duty rosters and timetables. At this time the tutorial presentations were discussed. The HOD had organised the first two tutorial sessions however the preservice teachers collaboratively decided what other tutorial topics would meet their current needs and interests. It was decided to meet the following week to arranged future tutorial topics which would be delivered by expert staff on campus.

During this first session each preservice teacher completed an Individual Development Plan and a KWL, these were referred to again at the end of the practicum. The preservice teachers were then taken on a tour of the school and introduced to all the teachers on campus. After the morning tea break each preservice teacher commenced their classroom experience in their allocated class for that first week.

School Experience Component

Each week the preservice teachers moved to another year level and to a different supervising teacher. As this concept was novel, the HOD constantly engaged in both formal and informal discussions with the preservice teachers and the supervising teachers. Many questions arose during this time such as : What is the exact role of the supervising teacher? How much actual teaching should the graduate entry students be engaged in? What are the specific expectations of the graduate entry students during this 7 week school experience component? To address a number of these issues, weekly times were set to meet with the graduate entry students to debrief, highlight expectations and roles, share experiences and solve any problems which did arise. On several occasions these meetings were attended by both the HOD and university liaison person to ensure open communication between all stakeholders.

At the beginning of the school experience component tutorial topics were negotiated with the graduate entry students. The HOD organised the first few tutorials to be presented then discussed options with the graduate entry students. The students complied a list and then prioritised the tutorial topics. This approach was decided upon to ensure the needs and interests of the students were being met. Once the
tutorial topics were decided the HOD then arranged for expert staff to deliver tutorials to the student group. The expert staff were chosen from across the campus including members of the administration staff, classroom teachers and specialist teachers. The HOD provided support to the teaching staff by teaching classes so teachers could prepare and deliver the tutorials. The students appreciated being active participants of the planning processes.

During week 5 of the school experience program the graduate entry students were asked to complete their top 3 choices of classes and submit to the HOD. The HOD then allocated the graduate entry students to specific classes for the remaining 4 school experience days and for their 4 week block practicum. In the majority of cases the graduate entry students were given their first choice and in all cases students were allocated to one of their top three choices. Once again this engaged the graduate entry students in decision making and taking responsibility for their choices.

**Evaluation of the Program**

To ensure outcomes were achieved and to review the program the HOD designed an evaluation sheet to be completed by each graduate entry student. This evaluation data has been invaluable and has informed future planning for the Graduate Entry programs at the school.

**Outcomes:**

- 100% preservice teachers rated the program as 8 or higher (10 being the top score). Mean score = 9.3
- 57% of Semester 1 preservice teachers returned to Varsity College as volunteers post-practicum.
- 2 Graduate Entry students have gained contracts at Varsity College following the completion of the course.
- A sample of survey comments included:

"Love that I can approach different teachers for advice, also that different kids approach 'ME' during the day"

"I especially liked the way we were encouraged to have input into what tutorials we wanted"

"Every tutorial was so valuable and I felt I could follow up with questions at any time"

"I liked being given information regularly as it made me feel included"

"Really appreciated the consideration and thought that was afforded to us. You have really considered
our needs and we appreciate that fact"

"Well organised and clear from the outset. What was expected and required - great level of support from 
all staff and teachers, aides, office staff etc"

"I have thoroughly enjoyed seeing all of the different levels and being welcomed by each teacher and 
invited to participate in classroom activities immediately"

"Wonderful to get exposure across the strata of grades - gives a clearer picture of how the school works 
as a whole and allows comparison of different grades"

"Being able to view different styles of teaching and just the whole class dynamics has been a real eye 
opener"

"I have learnt so much already it is close to overwhelming"

Changes for future programs

Changes to future programs occurred from feedback provided by staff and graduate entry students. The 
changes included:

- Involve other personnel such as tutors, parents, community members and other experts into the 
tutorial program. Maybe include members from external agencies such as Longman, EDSCO to 
participate in the tutorial program.

- Change the seven week rotational timetable to a five week rotational timetable to allow students 
4 days of school experience to settle into a classroom environment before the commencement of 
the 4 week block practicum begins.

Conclusion

The Graduate Entry program at Varsity College is constantly being reviewed and revised to meet the 
ever-changing needs of the student population. By empowering the preservice teachers they have 
demonstrated and taken responsibility for their own learning whilst participating in the program. To date 
our feedback from students has been extremely positive and we envisage our program growing in a 
futures-orientated direction.

School- University Partnership Program - Model
Model:

Focus teachers are selected according to the subjects required by the university prior to the pre-service teachers arriving at our school. Home teachers are also selected in advance and include the focus teachers where this is appropriate, as well as high quality class teachers with differing teaching styles across a range of grade levels.

The Field Studies co-ordinator covers other areas including an induction session, a behaviour management session, a session on planning of lessons and units of work and sessions on how to observe the supervising teacher.

A relief teacher is hired to take the focus teachers' classes. Focus teachers are released to take focus sessions for approximately one hour per focus. These sessions include practical tasks with children. Other practical tasks are set for the pre-service teachers to observe or attempt in home classes. The focus session is on one week while the pre-service teachers put tasks into practice the following week.

Restrictions:

- **Size of the school**- There are over 1200 students from Pre-school to Year 7. Because of this we found it necessary to introduce split lunches where the Year 6 and Year 7 students have different break times to the rest of the school. Non-contact time and specialist lessons are allocated in hourly blocks of time and some classes may not be available for substantial periods of time on the school studies days. This restricts the flexibility of being able to offer the pre-service teachers greater opportunities for interaction across the grade levels.

- **Number of pre-service teachers**- The size of our school means that we are able to accommodate a large number of pre-service teachers from all levels of teacher training at Griffith University (Gold Coast) as well as from other universities including The University of Newcastle, Southern Cross University, QUT and Griffith University Mt Gravatt. This semester we had 36 pre-service teachers from 3 universities. This further restricts the opportunity for Graduate Entry pre-service teachers to move between grade levels and limits our ability to extend our program.

- **Quality of supervising Teachers (Home Teachers)** - The necessity of having high quality supervising teachers is more important for the Graduate Entry pre-service teachers due to the
shortness of this Program. However, some of these high quality teachers are always asked to take
student teachers and from time to time elect to restrict their supervision to once a year or in some
cases once every two years. We have several contract teachers and some inexperienced teachers
throughout the school. While many of them would be suitable for the role of home teacher, for
various reasons, it would not be appropriate to use them for the Graduate Entry program.

- **Fridays**- Because Friday is traditionally a day for classes to do weekly testing and marking of
homework it is not the best day for observation during School Studies Days. Days earlier in the
week tend to be used for initiating concept development. Fridays are generally finishing off days
and are sports days for grade 5 to grade 7.

**Benefits:**

**Professional Development for Focus Teachers and Home teachers**

- Focus teachers develop deeper understandings of their role as a teacher, supervising teacher and
support for other supervising teachers. Two of the focus teachers recently, led related
professional development sessions for teachers at our school and other schools.

- Home teachers have a greater responsibility than other supervising teachers by having to be more
in tune with the focus areas that are being delivered and developing an in depth awareness of the
inexperience and needs of the pre-service teachers.

- Home teachers have another level of support from the focus teachers.

- Because we have such a wide range of pre-service teachers from all levels of their training the
needs of the Graduate Entry students in this shortened time frame are clearer and are begun to be
addressed during school studies days.

- Pre-service teachers get high quality focus teachers.

- The focus sessions are linked directly to the lectures at university and are linked to what is going
on in the school at the time-eg athletics carnival, musical, disco.

- Communication between the school and the University is heightened. Focus teachers met with
lecturers prior to the commencement of the program each semester

- There are closer links to other schools in the partnership due to regular meetings with
coordinators and university staff.

**Changes:**
Many changes have taken place due to a number of factors. These include:

- feedback from the student teachers and the focus teachers,
- change of staff leading to selection of different focus teachers,
- split lunchtimes
- and regular contact with university personnel.

Some of the changes include:

- providing the pre-service teachers with a timetable for school studies days,
- coordinating tasks related to focus sessions so the pre-service teachers are not overloaded,
- devising meaningful tasks to guide pre-service teachers in their observations of the supervising teacher
- and a detailed induction session on the first school studies day including interpretation of the handbook.

Highlights:

- Two focus teachers have become tutors for Griffith University (Gold Coast).
- One focus teacher was invited to transfer to a local high school to promote their literacy program.
- Many Graduate Entry pre-service teachers ask to come back to our school for their internship.
- Our Graduate Entry interns are comparable with regular interns. A recent Graduate Entry intern was so outstanding she was asked to take the place of a teacher going on leave. She is currently employed for the Semester.

Observations:

- This partnership program has a high level of labour intensity.
- The pre-service teachers in this program are mature age and have a range of different problems to undergraduate pre-service teachers. For example, many are married and have family commitments that they sometimes find difficult to re-arrange. Several have children, their
children from time to time are sick or need to be dropped off or picked up from day care/school which is less of a problem when they are attending uni, but creates difficulties when they are committed to field studies days or prac.

- Being mature age students many seem to have a very high standard and some experience difficulties when faced with the dilemma of the work load for assignments and the commitments of prac.