

## **Developing an integrative methodology to explore variations in experiences of partnership leading to a reconceptualised model of partnership**

Tanya Hathaway

*Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom*

### **Background**

Central to our consideration of the role of ITE at Liverpool Hope University is the partnership between academics, professionals and other specialists in training student teachers to contribute to improving the life chances of children and young people. Reports from various organisations, including AIM (2006) and The Work Foundation (2008) highlight how partnership and collaborative learning are viewed as a critical competence for organisations. This research project recognizes that our existing collaborative relationships are not unproblematic. Of particular concern, is that current practices are not fully aligned to our vision of the role of ITE for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For example, with most of our collaborative relationships the University (academic) is viewed as the primary collaborator/partner, and, whilst relationships are symbiotic, the 'power' tends to flow one way.

Further concerns are to do with the transparency of partnership agreements (including clear rationale, roles and responsibilities), capability (involving appropriate training and development), and ownership (linked to one's sense of being central to, and, having some control over, the ways in which the partnership has evolved). Such concerns bring into sharp relief the interface between the University, and other professionals and organisations, in supporting the development of subject knowledge for teachers and, ultimately, the wellbeing of the child. By identifying successful partnership practices these can be used to inform ITE programmes looking to create a 'new professionalism'. This allows student teachers to relate to other professionals in an effective way, engaging students in inter-professional activity in the context of the integrated children's workforce.

### **Research Questions**

This research focuses on the variation in the way academics, professionals and other specialists, as well as student teachers experience partnership in ITE. It examines variations experienced in partnership and associated practices and seeks to look at the role of the academics, professionals and specialists (in school or other settings), in promoting subject knowledge of student teachers at Liverpool Hope University.

The central objectives of the enquiry are:

- To examine (drawing on previous related research and practice-based evidence) the adequacy of existing partnership practices at both a conceptual and resource level
- To examine the conceptions of academics', professionals', experts', and students' in respect of the promotion of subject knowledge
- To explore the relationship between conceptions in respect of the promotion of subject knowledge and the notion of 'partnership'
- To use an integrative research methodology to generate a reconceptualised model of partnership practices and the design and delivery of the ITE curriculum, mindful of the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools

### **Methods**

The research methods used in this study form part of an integrated methodology comprising a series of stages. The multiple investigative techniques which are employed in a progressive phase, over a given period of time, lead to a synthesis of theory, research and practice knowledge.

The initial stages of the study employ a phenomenographic approach to research conducted through semi-structured interviews (Marton & Booth 1997). This phenomenographic approach aims to gain a greater understanding of academics', professionals', specialists', and student teachers' experiences of the phenomenon of partnership, constituting categories of description which are generalizable between situations (Marton 1981).

The later stages of the methodology involve research through workshops and focus groups and are similar to a Delphi study, drawing on participants' special knowledge to facilitate consensus and generate ideas. In the final stages a theoretical and research-based framework is synthesized with findings from the previous stages to produce a reconceptualised model of partnership.

## **Frame**

The integrative methodology combines a qualitative, case study approach drawing on notions of phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997; Åkerlind, 2003) with a participatory and consensus approach fused with theoretical and research-based ideas. Phenomenography is "the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced" (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). The object of phenomenographic research is to see the world from the participant's perspective.

In exploring the contribution of both internal and external partners, including the students themselves, the research seeks to describe conceptions of 'partnership'. Conceptions are considered as categories of description and represent the limited number of qualitatively different ways individuals experience a phenomenon (Marton 1981). Through condensing these categories, critical success elements of partnership are revealed and used to create conceptual schema representing successful partnership practices that accurately describes participants' current understandings and experiences.

The qualitative data from the phenomenographic study was analysed through:

- reading through interview reflections, coding and categorising in an iterative manner;
- searching for underlying foci and intentions expressed;
- constituting an outcome space with hierarchical qualitative categories of description.

In the workshop and focus groups a participatory and consensus approach to investigating the phenomena is adopted through:

- creating a shared consensus model of critical elements of successful partnership practices and producing conceptual schema; the agreed conceptual schema are fed forward into the next phase
- investigators incorporate all the information from the phenomenographic phase and participatory phases into an initial model of partnership which presents the collective understanding of the group
- the earlier phases of the methodology are integrating, and the initial model of partnership is synthesized with a theoretical and research-based framework to develop a reconceptualised model of partnership practices

## **Research findings**

In summary, the research will shed light on trainee teachers, academics, professionals and other specialists experiences of partnership to develop a model of partnership and 'new professionalism' that ensures that trainee teachers can develop effective practice and ways of working in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools environment.

More specifically, this project will:

- Identify and evaluate the variation in partnership practices focusing in on successful elements, combining this with a theoretical and research-based framework to produce a powerful reconceptualised model.
- Explore the role of related phenomena which contribute to the teacher effectiveness in practice, in particular the primacy of subject knowledge in teacher training integral to developing teachers' pedagogic content knowledge.
- Focus on the development of partnership and collaborative practices between academics, professionals and other specialists which contribute to effective training and development in ITE.