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## **Towards pedagogical partnerships with teachers: exploring the impact of Professional Learning Schools**

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### **Background**

Over the last 15 years, placement pressures for ITE have been driven by a neo-liberal agenda and centrally led policy initiatives that have determined a partnership landscape contoured with managerial determinants such as roles, responsibilities and legislated requirements. Framed as a 'market-driven model' (Furlong et al, 2008) most HEIs experience competition for places alongside the anxiety of an inspection regime with powers to shut down departments if found to be non-compliant. Little wonder then that Furlong et al (2000) suggested from their MOTE 1 & MOTE 2 studies that HEI providers had responded to these challenges with a model of partnership that left little active engagement by teachers.

As an academic appointed to a newly created post for schools partnership, the contrast of this prevalent HEI-led model of partnership with the idealised collaborative model of former times, led me to consider how a more pedagogical focus to partnership might impact on both the quality and quantity of placements sought (Edwards, 1995; Edwards et al, 2002; Mutton & Butcher, 2007).

Therefore to meet the growing challenge of competition for places and the seemingly negative attitude of teachers to working with year 1 undergraduate student teachers, I suggested developing 'Professional Learning Schools' (PLS) which drew on my previous professional experiences both in the UK and NZ. This was a collaborative model and drew on social constructivist pedagogies (Beck et al, 2004; Field & Philpott, 2000; Beck & Kosnik, 1997; Richardson, 1997) to engage teachers, tutors and students in processes of professional learning and development. Through this praxis, my declared passion and educational purpose were to facilitate enhanced learning experiences for student teachers which would also involve the teachers in pedagogical discourse.

This presentation will predominantly explore how teachers engaged with this new PLS model and give voice to their experiences, alongside highlighting aspects arising from the self-study of a schools partnership manager, instigating change and seeking to disturb the theory-practice binary.

### **Research Questions**

This research, drawn from my recently completed EdD, sought to ask: What opportunities, if any, are offered by the Professional Learning School (PLS) model for teachers to be involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and how might these opportunities impact on school-university partnerships?

Specifically:

- In what ways does the structure of the PLS model contribute to these opportunities?
- How do teachers make sense of the professional experiences this model facilitates?
- What impact if any, has this PLS model had on teachers' personal views of participating in ITE?
- As the instigator of the project, what are the implications for my personal and professional learning and what new knowledge might further inform my schools partnership role?

For the purposes of this presentation, the teacher voice will be presented - often not so easily heard when HEIs are facing placement shortages.

## **Methods**

Employing action research methodology within a self-study offered an interpretative framework by which I could explore the insights of the teachers participating in the model, and my own tensions and dilemmas arising as I moved away from a managerial towards a pedagogical model of partnership. The data was drawn from four schools, two of whom had participated in a trial the previous year. Using focus groups, sample questionnaires and interviews alongside my own journal, I reflexively analyse whether it is possible to describe a new space into which teachers move when they participate, and posit that by nurturing pedagogical discourse, this PLS model offers opportunities for pedagogical conversation and can motivate teachers towards greater involvement in ITE.

## **Frame**

In this study, the focus is on understanding the meaning of particular situations and phenomena (Pinnegar, 1998), and developing local knowledge that may also be useful to other educational communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This offers according to Zeichner (1999), 'a challenge to academic theories of teacher education that are formulated at a distance from the practice of teacher education and new possibilities for reformulating and strengthening those theories' (p.12). This offered an explanation for the tensions I was experiencing and suggests a way to 'disturb' the theory-practice binary, often implicated in the organisation of traditional school-university partnerships.

## **Research findings**

This study offers evidence that the PLS model may disturb the neo-liberal agenda, with implications for HEIs, for teachers and for other schools partnership staff. The findings suggest that the PLS model did facilitate opportunities for teachers to enter a new space where pedagogical discourses were possible alongside HEI tutors. By adopting an 'inquiry stance', the linear direction and performative function of teacher dialogue currently operating with student teachers appeared to be disturbed. Instead of merely assisting student teachers to acquire the required skills to perform and achieve the imposed centrally determined standards, teachers spoke in this research about a more engaged dialogue with student teachers, actively describing how the model offered a different role for their participation in ITE.

This research also illustrates how in the PLS model, teachers played a pivotal role in potentially mediating learning for student teachers. The structure of the model offered opportunities for teachers to draw on their professional knowledge, reflections and associations with the learned 'theories', and to articulate their insights. Therefore I suggest that the PLS model may offer a new approach to school-university partnerships at a time when HEIs are being challenged to move to more school-based models of ITE.

Since HEI-led models of partnership generally fail to invite teacher empowerment and interest in their own professionalism, evidence from this study suggests that this more collaborative and pedagogical model was found to nurture reciprocity and mutuality, and could reinvigorate partnerships when there is a shortage of quality placements. By reinvesting the profession with moral purpose beyond the technical-rationalist imperative, this model could contribute to the shape of the changing profession.