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Partners on the Border: Schools and Universities Researching for Change

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Abstract

The field of teacher education is border and boundary rich. Navigating and attempting to confront the seemingly intractable boundaries between schools and universities, and between research and teacher education goes with the territory. Schools and teacher education may share the broad goal of improved educational outcomes for all students, but how they might practically collaborate to tackle and research teaching and learning issues is less clear. This paper reflects on a university-schools partnership that addresses some of these issues through new practice within a Collaborative Practitioner Research (CPR) framework. The project has generated new knowledge about school-university research partnerships and their potential to support professional collaboration for improved outcomes and school change, thus facilitating the enrichment and re-envisioning of both teacher and preservice teacher education.

Introduction

The historic divide between universities and schools in teacher education and in educational research is well discussed and documented in the literature, as are attempts to transcend the boundaries and engage in collaborative research which seeks to challenge traditional notions of validity, knowledge and power (Cherednichenko & Kruger, 2001b; Davies, Grace, & Eckersley, 2008; Andrew D Gitlin, 2008; Gore & Gitlin, 2004).

Teacher education itself is conducted through a range of models which employ quite distinct methodologies and relationships to knowledge and action. They range from technical and content based approaches to more transformative models aimed at developing reflective practitioners whose teaching is geared to institutional and social change. When teacher educators engage with schools, even in “partnerships” where shared understandings might be assumed, there is strong potential therefore for miscommunication of understandings if models are not clearly articulated and understood (Taylor, 2008).

Practitioners and theorists suggest that basic skills models of teacher education where “learning is essentially a matter of decoding skills in reading, computation skills in mathematics and memorising facts..dispensed by teachers..” (Latham et al., 2007, p. 286) remain a default view of teaching for many, including teachers in schools and preservice teachers. The approach highlights rigidly applied codes and schematas, hierarchical understandings of skills and knowledge and to extend the metaphor of the borderlands is symbolised by the walled “fiefdom” of the individual classroom (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 15). New modes however are characterised by more porous and open approaches – cross disciplinary learning, the sharing of classroom spaces, and “flat” teaching teams. Relationships with knowledge are more open and fluid, and teachers are required to develop

more autonomous and self directed approaches to their work, becoming “responsible, self-managing professionals...” Kalantzis and Cope describe teachers’ work as dynamic, constantly negotiating and renegotiating learning and attending to process as well as product in developing understanding about individual students’ learning.

When tensions exist within teacher education and within schools more generally regarding roles of teachers and of schooling then the potential for border confusion between universities and schools can be strong (Taylor, 2008). They can be further exacerbated by pressures of policy and accountability mechanisms, where teachers and schools are increasingly drawn into what Ball has described as cultures of performativity (Ball, 2003), retreating into “more or less respected apprentice-into-trade models of teacher education”, with preservice teachers inducted into fully demarcated classrooms and curriculum (Lovat, 2003, p. 3).

Understanding of these tensions and of external pressures on schools and universities in framing approaches to practice and pedagogy is vital in the construction of sustainable relationships between these institutions. Just as the crossing of a physical border requires a respectful approach and a willingness to accommodate misunderstandings and work through limitations, so too does collaborative work between schools and universities. This research focuses on the use of a collaborative research project undertaken by a university and its school partners to develop a site where university and school partners develop a shared project vision and employ that to address a range of research and learning issues, including the contextualisation and support of the learning of preservice teachers working within the project schools.

Partnerships between schools and universities in the realm of preservice teacher education have been so effectively integrated into policy statements and perspectives in recent years that they assume the status of a given. But researchers have long pointed out the variability of such partnerships and have identified a clear continuum of university-school partnership models, from complementary to collaborative (Furlong et al, 1996) In Victoria today, efforts to successfully navigate school-university” border crossings” are arguably as important as ever given the persistent and in many cases deepening issues of inequity and social disadvantage in education, and the emerging expectation for educational institutions to work together to develop strategies to overcome them (DEECD, 2008). School-university collaborative efforts contributing to the development of alternative research methodologies are a response to those pressures and expectations; they are not only able to frame and support valid research outcomes but also inform structural change that can further remove boundaries between schools and universities into the future.

Established in 2007, the Access and Success (A&S) project at Victoria University (VU) was set up to ‘improve the access and successful participation of young people in post compulsory education and training through collaborative research and deliberate informed strategic action through partnerships with schools in the western region of Melbourne’ (Cherednichenko & Williams, 2007). It built on already successful practices within the university, particularly in the School of Education, by developing existing relationships with schools in the region and undertaking school-based research. Within partner schools teachers, university staff, university students and sometimes school students came together in “research teams” to investigate issues nominated by schools as of immediate importance to learning and change within their own setting. The case of the Raven cluster, as presented below, shows how the collaborative approach of such teams mandates investigations across a range of levels or “layers” – research into the university-school partnership, into the professional learning

experienced by university and school researchers, and into the school based outcomes emerging over the life of the project.

This paper seeks to make a contribution to a much-needed discussion around the practical and concrete experiences of attempts at collaborative school-university partnerships. Through a review of the literature and also of our own expectations and objectives we consider how this A&S partnership has evolved, demonstrating some successful border crossings and at the same time identifying a number of borders not yet crossed.

Let's Stop Passing The Buck

The *Let's Stop Passing the Buck* project is a long term strategic partnership between the A&S project, the VU School of Education and the 5 secondary schools of the Raven Cluster in Melbourne's west. It was established in 2007 when the Raven Principals Network, already overcoming territorial borders by functioning effectively as a cluster of neighbourhood schools, approached the Access and Success project team with the identified issue of critical student disengagement, and asked how VU and the cluster might work together to address this.

Let's Stop Passing the Buck arose in response to Raven Cluster's concern for its small minority of primary and secondary students whose extreme disengagement tended to lead to repeated and routine suspensions and ultimately expulsion from school. In practical terms this often meant that students and their issues were merely passed from one school to another within the cluster, a strategy that failed to address individual students' needs and promoted instability and concern at the school level. Schools felt it was time to "stop passing the buck." After several conversations between the cluster principals and A&S a project objective was clarified;

To develop and implement a Collaborative Action Research project to investigate, understand and respond to critical student disengagement in the cluster, with a view to enriched learning environments for all students through improved outcomes/school change.

A project team of VU preservice teachers undertaking year-long placements within Cluster schools, a teacher colleague and a VU researcher was established which then identified a set of key research questions around student engagement in their school settings. The preservice teachers comprised Bachelor of Education and Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education students who spent each Tuesday across the academic year and a number of week-long blocks in each semester in their school. They made up the core of professional research teams which met regularly on Tuesdays to plan and lead multi-faceted action including pilot programs, with a view to informing whole-school change. They have attracted project funding, generated school and cluster level research reports and contributed to regional work on issues of student disengagement.

Now in its third year, the project is entering a new ambitious phase aimed at strengthening whole-school responses to student engagement, coordinated across the network and with an emphasis on key indicators and action to improve outcomes. Its employment of collaborative practitioner methodologies has allowed the project to resituate preservice teacher education as on-site, professional collaboration with teacher colleagues outside of the classroom. In so doing, it also supports professional development for teachers, builds leadership, mentoring

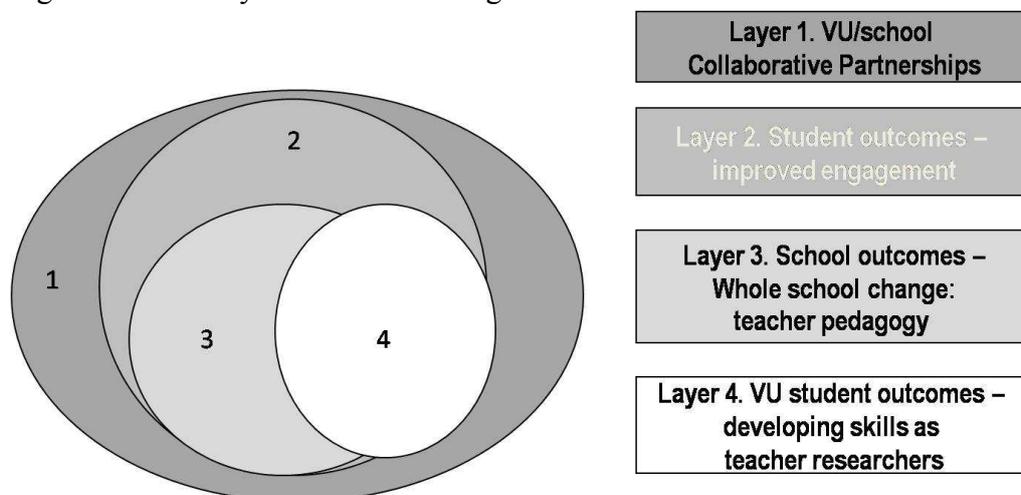
and research skills and provides the opportunity for increased professional dialogue with colleagues with similar responsibilities across the cluster.

Collaborative Practitioner Research Methodology

Although state and federal policies emphasise the power of partnerships and reflective practice in underpinning school effectiveness (DEECD, 2009), the established paradigms of educational research outlined by Gitlin (1990), where the academy maintains a strict hold on knowledge and new knowledge generation, remain largely unchanged. Teachers are still all too often expected to passively accept the findings of academic educational research as true and valid. The approach to the development and evaluation of Access and Success partnerships is based, on the other hand, on a commitment to collaborative and inclusive practices without privileging researcher imposed knowledge (Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger, & O'Rourke, 2001) and in fact begin with a recognition of the successful work already undertaken by teachers and schools in the region. Teachers working in Melbourne's West in schools with educational outcomes that are low in comparison to other regions (Teese, 2005; Wiseman, 2006), and in communities that experience well documented social and economic disadvantage (Black, 2007; MWACC, 2004) are already doing much to support the learning of their students. Can collaborative practitioner research methodologies assist a university to contribute to current action to further support and improve practice and how might such work be evaluated and understood in supporting knowledge development of all partners?

In response to that question a multi-layered evidence-based research approach has been developed. It aims to capture and analyse data at both the individual project and aggregated levels, to investigate and theorise school practice with a view to supporting improvement. It investigates and extends VU students' professional learning and teacher professional development and research capacity. Concurrently it aims to generate new learning around the sustainability and effective outcomes of partnerships between schools and VU and the development of educational capacity in the region (Davies, Eckersley et al., 2008). Figure 1 depicts the multi-layered nature of the research, investigating both the practice and outcomes of the project team and the structure and effectiveness of the partnership model.

Figure 1. Multi-layered research design.



(Davies, Eckersley et al., 2008)

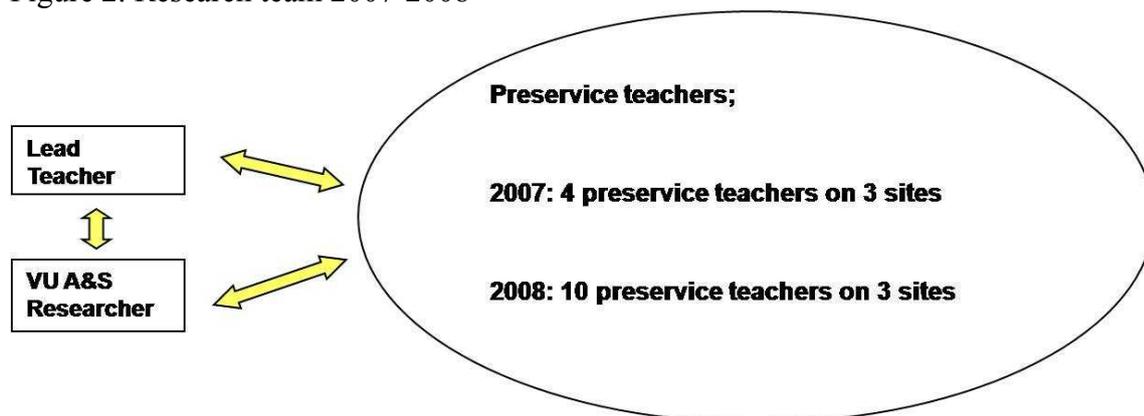
The research process has involved concurrent investigation of all four layers. The research team has analysed existing school-based and region-wide data alongside the generation and analysis of qualitative data through interviews, reflective practitioner conversations and case writing. It adopts the Collaborative Practitioner Research (CPR) approach (Cherednichenko, Davies et al. 2001) which emphasises the development of research skills in all partners to enable collaborative analysis and problem solving, within an Action Research framework (Dalmau et al., 2007). Although the research team comprises teachers, university academics and preservice teachers the CPR model specifically addresses questions of hierarchical knowledge, privileging and power in its insistence on the validity of all voices within the research group. This paper is primarily concerned with a discussion around Layers 1 and 4 and the implications of the model for teaching and learning within the partnership.

Borders crossed and those yet to be crossed

The experiences of the Raven Cluster partnership provide examples of borders crossed and also examples of boundaries and borders that remain untraversed. A critical investigation of the developmental partnership process highlights how the model has evolved to support the research and further extend the collaborative partnership and its potential.

2007 and 2008: What worked

Figure 2. Research team 2007-2008



➤ Locally appropriate project

The project agenda was shaped by the schools from the outset. At the school level the research was informed by and connected to each school's Annual Implementation Plan and overall strategic planning. This proved critical in attempting to go beyond a traditional preservice teacher placement to develop a collaborative research project involving teachers and preservice teachers. It meant that schools assumed from the outset their role in driving the research agenda and in contextualising and framing the preservice teachers' experiences. The flexibility and openness of the model and a fundamental commitment to school driven foci for each project allowed the Raven Cluster Principals' Network to lead the partnership based on its identified priorities.

As the project developed during the first two years, a number of the success factors and challenges facing a genuinely collaborative project emerged.

➤ **Willingness to push boundaries**

Concretely, the first real boundary that needed to be shifted if not yet removed altogether was the line drawn around preservice teacher education. Ellis (2008) points out that preservice teachers may be asked by their universities to cross boundaries that “themselves were not open to examination and transformation” (p. 2), and that schools may in fact be resistant to such transformation, holding more traditional views of the preservice teacher practicum.

In the case of this partnership, the principals supported the teachers involved to view the project as Action Research, giving permission to challenge existing boundaries, and explicitly supporting preservice teachers’ active participation in the research process. The culture of innovation that Hooley and Moore (2005) refer to as being critical in innovative and collaborative partnerships in teacher education, was demonstrated through the willingness of the principals to explore the possibilities of an on-site action research framework for preservice teacher education. Whereas preservice teachers are often told “this is what we do and how we do it, you can do this”, this partnership was asking “what are *we* going to do about this?” In the Raven cluster framework the project team collectively analysed existing data and directed the generation and analysis of new data, informing mutually agreed strategies for practice. Guided by the principles of Action Research, the project team effectively facilitated (the first stage of) a negotiated and shared response to the issue of student engagement through a participatory, practical, critical, reflexive and dialectical social process (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 23-24).

This openness was more easily facilitated given that the aforementioned line drawn around preservice teacher education had already been repositioned as a result of long term relationships between the cluster schools and the School of Education’s Project Partnerships (PP). The PP model involves preservice teachers attending schools each Tuesday as well as for their more traditional block placements, to undertake an Applied Curriculum Project (ACP). The ACPs are ideally undertaken in collaboration with school colleagues and are fundamentally about improved learning for school students (Hooley & Moore, 2005). The objective of the ACP is to make explicit connections between the theory reflected on in the core course content and the practice of teaching and learning in the school. Ideally, the ACPs are of value to the schools and extend the mutual benefit of the placement, challenging the notion of the passive preservice teacher, merely soaking up a school environment and gaining knowledge. Instead, this model intends to support the preservice teacher as an active contributor to teaching and learning in the school (Dalmau et al., 2007).

The Raven cluster schools entered this partnership extremely supportive of and familiar with the PP/ACP model, and so were able to see the opportunities for developing an action plan around the identified issue of student disengagement for the preservice teachers each Tuesday.

➤ **Commitment and time**

Initial conversations between the school principals and Access and Success emphasised a 3-5 year commitment. There was agreement that this project would take time, that objectives and outcomes may not always be clear, and that the process would be as important as the outcome in terms of new learning for the preservice teachers, the school colleagues and the university.

During 2007 and 2008, one lead teacher, based at one of the schools and with a 2 period time allowance¹, worked closely with 4 and then 10 preservice teachers across 3 of the 5 schools, and the A&S researcher. In that time the team conducted literature reviews on student disengagement, facilitated and analysed student focus group data based on initial student attitudes surveys, scoped perspectives and practices in student engagement amongst staff across the cluster and prepared and presented two annual reports. The work was reported to the school communities.

2007 and 2008: Limitations

Despite the significance of project outcomes the team recognised some inherent limitations in this model as a partnership. Firstly, the preservice teachers were split in their reporting and supervisory relationships within the school. For their teaching responsibilities they were assigned to mentor colleagues who were not involved in the project, and who did not have any particular responsibility for or connection to student engagement in the school. While they had a strong relationship with the one lead teacher, they effectively had nothing to do with other significant colleagues in the school whose work was at the heart of the issue the team were researching.

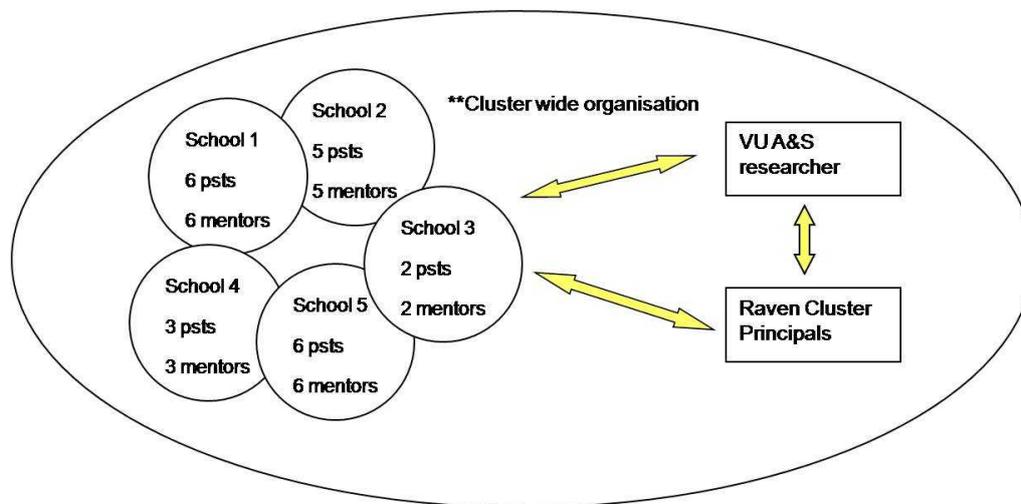
Secondly, while the project team had gone beyond a more traditional preservice teacher placement experience, the research was ultimately a study *by* preservice teachers *of* school practice (albeit in collaboration with one lead teacher). The preservice teachers felt that the work of the project was being undermined by its low profile and its disconnectedness from core planning. One preservice teacher commented that she felt awkward in the staffroom when working on the project, with one teacher at the school asking her “Why aren’t you teaching? You should be in the classroom!” There continued to be some suspicion amongst staff based on an evaluation of the preservice teachers drawn from the expectations and outcomes of a more traditional preservice teacher placement.

2009: A new model

In November 2008 the project team presented the end of year report to a meeting of principals, teachers and university colleagues. With a commitment from all present, an ambitious new model was developed to support the project in 2009.

¹ Supported by a DEECD Practitioners as Researchers grant, successfully applied for by the project team in both 2007 and 2008.

Figure 3. Research team 2009



➤ **Professional Research Teams**

In 2009 a professional research team is based on each school site, involving the mentor teachers and preservice teachers, and led by a designated “driver” from amongst the school colleagues. The mentor teachers are matched to the preservice teachers according to their teaching methods, and supervise the preservice teachers’ block placements and face-to-face teaching time. Critically, they are also participating in the research project because they hold a position of responsibility relating to the schools’ student engagement priorities; they are Leading Teachers, Student Engagement Coordinators, Middle Years Coordinators etc. Concretely this required the university to allocate preservice teachers to the project on the basis that their teaching methods matched those of the relevant colleagues in each site.

➤ **Raised profile within cluster schools**

The preservice teachers are communicating the details of the project more consciously to the broader school community through a bulletin which includes overall project details and school specific action/s. The hope is that this will further support the preservice teachers in their roles as researchers in the school, and also broaden support for and interest in the project’s aims.

Each school-based team has designated time in the official school calendar for project meetings on a Tuesday, as well as 3 cluster wide meetings across the year. The school based meetings are reflecting on the previous two years of research and collaboratively planning an action agenda for 2009. Cluster-wide organisation has been built in across the year bringing all teams together, to enable effective strategies to be shared for improved outcomes, and to generate a network-wide understanding of and approaches to student engagement. The improved model represents a significant commitment from the schools, and is an important step in the direction of genuine shared ownership of the research.

➤ **Flexibility and creativity in supporting schools’ needs**

As established from the outset, a positive feature of this partnership is the commitment to locally-appropriate solutions that are sustainable beyond the life of the project. This has resulted in each school team undertaking different action within the overall project, and in

particular has required flexibility and enterprise from our preservice teachers, in taking up the actions decided on by each research team. In 2009 some examples of the type of action the Professional Research Teams have negotiated at the school level include;

- An investigation into the experiences of Year 8 students to improve their engagement and to support a proactive approach to tackling the known drop in engagement amongst Year 9 students. Alongside the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative attitudes data, the preservice teachers and teachers will plan, implement and evaluate a series of “Thinkfest” activities, social and cultural events and activities which focus on strong peer, and student-teacher relationships.
- An investigation into female students, sport education and disengagement, which aims to explore and better understand an identified connection between the subject and reduced engagement particularly at the Year 9 and 10 levels. This research aims to develop mentoring strategies and programs and improved pedagogy across the college.
- Research into assessment practices, positive learning experiences and self esteem, through focus groups and surveys. The key research question is “what helps you learn?”

2009 challenges: hitting the fence

Let's Stop Passing the Buck has thrown up a multitude of questions for Collaborative Practitioner Research, and highlighted some important issues and challenges for those interested in developing a transformative teacher education. Despite the strength and seemingly enduring state of the partnership, and alongside the successful border crossings, territories continue to be defended and at times different cultures have emerged as overriding. How these challenges are perceived and overcome is vitally important. Of primary importance is a rejection of the assumption that collaboration and mutual benefit are based on shared imperatives. Breaking down boundaries doesn't mean partners are no longer in their own territory, with their own interests and emphases, and in fact it is entirely appropriate that schools and universities have their own distinct needs within collaborative partnerships. The partnership must be based on how and why these interests intersect and can support mutual goals, and conducted respectfully and openly to avoid exploitation, conscious or otherwise.

Recognising and understanding the different institutional frameworks through which partners operate is critical, and has enabled the partnership to continually negotiate and transcend these differences to achieve shared goals. VU as a constant partner has played a critical role in maintaining an emphasis on process, methodology and new learning for all partners, that has fostered a reflective approach that values the knowledge of all partners and is open to change. This has proven particularly important given the contested terrain of teacher education, where despite shared commitment to the project, a diverse range of perspectives on teacher education and its possibilities have both driven and hindered the process. These experiences can inform ongoing efforts to develop a practical and concrete vision for a preservice teacher education that honours the transformative model.

Problematising CPR

There are certainly different emphases and research priorities amongst the project team. All partners have improved educational outcomes for students at the core of their commitment to the project. For our school partners the layer of research around the outcomes of the project (the generation and analysis of school-based data, the documentation, evaluation and

reflection on changed practice) is usually the most critical. There are mixed responses to the research layer which seeks to understand and improve school-university partnerships, to deepen and extend the preservice teacher experience in schools and to inform the university's perspective on community engagement and social responsibility. Preservice teachers tend to contribute more to the thinking around the partnership process, what's working, what's not, asking "what contribution am I making?" Generally this is as much motivated by their commitment to the project and its potential as it is by their concerns around coursework and in particular assessment as students.

There is much to be done in developing the Collaborative Practitioner Research model as one which effectively facilitates and fosters a genuinely shared ownership over the research process. While here the research plan was initially entirely VU designed, the methodology is fundamentally about teacher and preservice teachers as active researchers and shared reflection and action for change. However through time constraints and the aforementioned emphasis from teacher and preservice teachers on the immediate tasks and outcomes of the school-based projects, the theorising that seeks to understand the complexity of experiences across the cluster, and its significance for new models, has tended to drop off the agenda in team research meetings. This results in project-wide theorising taking place through papers such as this one, solely in the hands of the academics. This might not have a significant impact on the projects themselves or their immediate outcomes, but has real implications for the notion of engaged research that require interrogation.

Conclusion

The metaphor of boundaries and borders has proven useful in considering the value of this partnership, and has enabled us to move beyond indicative reflection and begin to draw some conclusions about what we've experienced to date as partners in research. It has raised questions around the value of the research for teacher education generally, for the preservice teachers themselves, for the school partners and for the university.

Arguably the most important feature of the Raven Cluster partnership is the culture of change that has been established. If not always strictly Action Research, the genuine negotiation and constant reflection that has characterised the work of the project team moves it significantly beyond more conventional partnerships. For preservice teachers to experience and participate in such a change process is perhaps a new thing. While it is emphasised in curriculum, preservice teachers' perspectives and experiences of change have traditionally remained theoretical and academic. Openness, respect, flexibility and joint commitment over time have proven to be the prerequisites for the development of a culture of change. The ongoing employment, testing and development of the CPR model has been fundamental in the facilitation of such relationship building.

While the placement of preservice teachers in the cluster schools remains the project's crucible, diverse outcomes of the partnership impact on the schools themselves and also the university. The work has resulted in some teachers re-envisioning the possibilities for preservice teachers in schools and has informed the university's thinking about development and extension of its practicum model. The project is now embedded in school planning and practically responding to region-wide objectives around greater school-network collaboration. It has demonstrated in practice how school-university research partnerships might best support and extend the possibilities for collaborative research and informed action across school-university borders and a transformative teacher education.

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