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(De)Valuing Partnerships in Contemporary Teacher Education: Lessons from Four Australian Universities

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Abstract

To be effective, productive and sustainable, teacher education faculties need to mobilise multiple partnerships involving diverse groups of gatekeepers, participants and stakeholders with separate aspirations. A key element of that mobilization must be identifying ways to fulfill those aspirations as far as possible, thereby valuing members of the partnerships. Yet, given that partners' interests are often competing, it is difficult to value all partners equally, potentially leading to a devaluing of the partnership and of the teacher education that it is intended to promote.

This paper addresses the research question, "Which forms of partnerships add value to and are valued by Australian schools and faculties of teacher education?" The research context is four such schools and faculties, traversing regional Queensland and metropolitan Sydney. The research design draws on a qualitative, inductive, comparative case study method (Lloyd-Jones, 2003) that elicited analytical themes from a common set of questions applied to selected teacher education partnerships in the four institutions.

The thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) applied to the responses to these questions yielded findings that were consistent with the theoretical framework related to educational partnerships developed by Cardini (2006). In particular, the valuing of partnerships depends on explicit and sustained efforts to value the contributions of individual partners and to render the partnership the sum of all parts, rather than being principally to benefit the host institution. The significance of these findings lies in identified strategies for teacher education schools and faculties and their diverse partners to enhance the mutual advantages of their partnerships.

Keywords: Australia, partnerships, teacher education, valuing

Introduction

The capacity for Australian schools and faculties of teacher education to mobilise effective, productive and sustainable partnerships depends partly on the extent to which those partnerships are valued and enhanced in practice by their respective members. These partnerships are complex and diverse, reflecting the equivalent complexity and diversity of the teacher education field. One key partnership site centres on the professional experience of pre-service teachers, with moves to highlight the agency and responsibility of the education sites involved in such partnerships (Edwards & Mutton, 2007; McIntyre, 2009; Zeichner, 2010), to reconceptualise the partnership between theory and practice in teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) and to innovate relationships between education sites and teacher education institutions (for example, with experienced teachers teaching in the university component of teacher education programs [Pitfield & Morrison, 2009]). Another partnership site relates to the connections between teacher education institutions and certifying authorities (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007; Henley & Young, 2009; Scribner & Heinen, 2009). Other possible partnerships derive from formal and informal collaborations between teacher education institutions, both nationally (Murray, Campbell, Hextall, Hulme, Jones, Mahony, Menter, Procter, & Wall, 2009) and internationally (Hudson & Zgaga, 2008). Still other forms of potential partnership are epistemological and scholarly in character, including calls for a greater integration

between research into teaching and research into teacher education (Grossman & McDonald, 2008).

This paper uses a qualitative, inductive, comparative case study method (Lloyd-Jones, 2003) and thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to explore teacher education partnerships and their relative (de)valuing in four Australian schools and faculties of teacher education. The analysis is framed by Cardini's (2006) conceptualisation of educational partnerships and addresses the paper's research question, "Which forms of partnerships add value to and are valued by Australian schools and faculties of teacher education?" The authors argue that maximising the separate and shared benefits and interests of the respective partners is crucial to ensuring that teacher education partnerships are mutually advantageous and affirming, but that such an outcome is neither automatic nor easy in the contemporary teacher education landscape.

The paper consists of three sections:

- A selective literature review, conceptual framework and research design
- A thematic analysis of the authors' reflections on the partnerships in their respective teacher education schools and faculties
- Concluding implications of the analysis for adding value to Australian teacher education.

Literature Review, Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Contemporary teacher education schools and faculties lie at the intersection of multiple partnerships that they must harness and harmonise if they are to enact their programs and courses. At the same time, the other members of those partnerships have their own concerns and priorities, of which contributing to teacher education is often a relatively minor part. Current studies highlight the multiple challenges and opportunities attending these interactions, as well as the potential for misunderstandings and misalignments between partners.

The literature identifies several potential sources of such misunderstandings and misalignments. One source is the possible tension between teacher education seen as a rational and linear developmental process and teacher education understood as uneven development and a psychology of uncertainty (Britzman, 2007). Another source is a perceived disconnection between teacher education and the induction of beginning teachers (Moran, Abbott, & Clarke, 2009). Yet another source is the increasing practice of using educational technologies such as online delivery in teacher education (Robertson, 2008) that are not necessarily welcomed by teachers in educational sites (Borko, Whitcomb, & Liston, 2009).

Despite these potential sources of tension in teacher education partnerships, there are several positive elements that encourage the development of those partnerships. One element is the increasingly collective character of the work and identities of teachers (Grangeat & Gray, 2008) that explicitly valorises collaboration and interdependence among teachers and by implication in teacher education. Another element is evidence of the beneficial impact of collaborative action research approaches to both pre-service and beginning teacher education (Gilles, Wilson, & Elias, 2010; Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009; see also Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). Yet another element is current research into evidence of collaboration among teacher educators (Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2009), with its implications for more broadly based partnerships between teacher educators and other stakeholders.

One way to engage with these potential misunderstandings and positive elements in contemporary teacher education partnerships is to revisit conceptualisations of such partnerships and of their value(s). In particular, we highlight the relevance of the political dimension of those conceptualisations (Furlong, McNamara, Campbell, Howson, & Lewis, 2008) because it throws into stark relief the multiple and sometimes competing interests and goals of the various participants. One compelling conceptualisation of educational partnerships that was previously applied to early

childhood teacher education (Brown & Danaher, 2008) was elaborated by Cardini (2006), whose central contention was that:

The notion of partnership constructs a vision of public policy that stresses efficiency, devolution and participation and in which everyone seems to benefit. However, when the actual practice of partnerships is explored, a different picture emerges. Rather than inclusive, symmetrical and democratic social practices, current partnerships are revealed to be facilitating and legitimating central policy decision-making as well as the private sector involvement in the delivery of public policies. (p. 393)

Furthermore, “... the theoretical definition of partnership has to recognize the issue of power and establish working relationships in which struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues” (Cardini, 2006, p. 412). This reinforces the necessity of interrogating and deconstructing the words and actions of individual partners as well as their interactions with other partners if the extent and effects of (de)valuing specific teacher education partnerships are to be identified and understood.

To demonstrate this argument, we present in the next section a thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) of our discrete and combined responses to equivalent questions about selected partnerships in our respective teacher education schools and faculties. The research design is based on a qualitative, inductive, comparative case study method (Lloyd-Jones, 2003) that highlighted both commonalities and differences across the four case sites.

Thematic Analysis

Three of the four case sites are located in regional Queensland and have a multi-campus university operations model, while the other site has a single campus in metropolitan Sydney. Three sites have schools and the fourth has a faculty of education, and all four provide pre-service, graduate entry and postgraduate teacher education programs. All four sites are committed to enhancing engagement with their multiple communities, although the demographic and other features of those communities vary considerably. Likewise all four sites have varying mixes of domestic and international students with some diversity in the range of countries represented by the latter cohort.

The questions that we posed to ourselves and one another about the teacher education partnerships operating in the four case sites focused on what the partnerships in each school or faculty were, who was involved as representatives of which organisations, which attributes, expectations and interests, the organisations and their representatives brought to the partnership, the perceptions of the partnership held by the respective partners and the impact of those perceptions on the partnership’s value and effectiveness to each partner, including the host school or faculty. Specific examples of partnerships elicited from the analysis ranged from those with education sites where pre-service teachers completed their professional experience to interactions with state certifying authorities to school or faculty advisory boards to organisations providing funding for research projects conducted by school or faculty academics.

The framework for the thematic analysis was gleaned from selected aspects of Cardini’s (2006) conceptualisation of educational partnerships – what she termed “three fundamental mismatches between theoretical and empirical definitions of partnerships” (p. 398). Each was found to constitute a powerful lens for illuminating otherwise implicit and invisible features of the partnerships functioning in the four institutions.

1) Political and organisational constraints for cooperative practice amongst working partners (Cardini, 2006, p. 398)

Cardini (2006) contended that it was important “... to analyse the political or ‘macro’ limits for cooperative relationships between partners” (p. 399), not least because “[e]ach type of collaboration

responds to a distinct objective and partnership structure, [and] draws on a different legitimization discourse and their particular restrictions must be analysed on a specific analytical level” (p. 399).

The authors identified several external forces impacting on and potentially constraining cooperative practice among the working partners involved in the teacher education partnerships in the four institutions. As we elaborate below, a key force was government legislation and policy at both national and state levels. This force was evident at the federal level in such varied developments as the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Woodhouse & Stokes, 2010), the closing of the Australian Teaching and Learning Council and the announcement of national professional standards for teachers to which teacher education programs will be required to contribute in a scheme to be administered by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (Kleinhenz, 2010). Similarly the mission-based compacts negotiated by the Commonwealth Government with individual universities were influential – for example, in projecting student enrolments in teacher education programs. Likewise there was evidence of university senior managers encouraging deans of faculties and heads of schools of education to reduce the minimum tertiary entrance score required to enter their pre-service programs if doing so compensated for lower than expected enrolments in other disciplines.

Another key force of political and organisational constraints on opportunities for partnerships in the four institutions was the impact of the state-based teacher registration authorities (see also Connell, 2009): the Queensland College of Educators and the New South Wales Institute of Teachers. These bodies have exercised increasing influence on the character and development of teacher education programs through such means as requiring an explicit linkage between those programs and professional teacher standards that program graduates are required to fulfil.

While many of the issues traversed by these external forces are appropriate and relevant to teacher education, their evidently expanding influence constrains some of the opportunities for developing effective partnerships within teacher education institutions and between those institutions and other stakeholders. This is because such partnerships have less room to manoeuvre, and are consequently devalued by some potential members, than if the wider environment allowed greater freedom of intention and action.

2) Privileged and unprivileged partners: The role and power of different sectors within partnerships (Cardini, 2006, p. 402)

Cardini (2006) contrasted the rhetorical and theoretical view whereby “[s]ector partners are presented as different but symmetrical organizations, each one with its own neutral advantages that are combined through partnership with other partners’ characteristics” (p. 402) with the reality that “[t]he practice of partnerships is quite different” (p. 402). In particular, “[t]he historical and political contexts in which partnerships work, shape very different relationships between partners, empowering some and subordinating others” (p. 402).

To some extent this assertion was confirmed by the teacher education partnerships evident in the authors’ four institutions, yet in other ways it was contradicted by those partnerships. On the one hand, the respective school or faculty of teacher education was the dominant partner in each partnership that it established, setting the agenda and evaluating the proposed outcomes before implementing those that it considered appropriate and feasible. In many ways this was inevitable, and was matched by equivalent situations in other partnerships to which the school or faculty belonged as a relatively minor partner (for example, school or Technical and Further Education college advisory boards).

On the other hand, the partnerships demonstrated considerable interdependence and shared interests, suggesting that even when the school or faculty of education assumed the role of dominant

partner other participants contributed vital expertise and support that were crucial to the partnership's success. Furthermore, sets of informal and friendly relationships had been established between each institution and many of its respective networks of partners in local organisations. These findings were illustrated by the formal meetings of school and faculty advisory boards, with the non-university partners contributing much by way of advice and useful links with the broader community, and also by the informal good humour and donation of prizes presented at annual awards evenings, again highlighting the school's or faculty's location within a vibrant and mutually reinforcing web of interactions whose effect was to situate the teacher education graduates in a wider and generally productive social system that valued its diverse members' activities and was vital to the attainment of their outcomes.

3) Local-bottom-up or central-top-down policy implementation?

(Cardini, 2006, p. 407)

Cardini (2006) claimed that "Partnership rhetoric seems to obscure the fact that current policy agendas are centrally defined and controlled, presenting them instead as a compromise established between different local organizations and agents" (p. 407). As we noted above, the reach of federal and state government legislation and policy-making is ongoing and increasing, making the approaches to policy implementation and to partnership creation by schools and faculties of teacher education much more likely to be centralised and top-down than localised and bottom-up. This was certainly the case with the four institutions involved in this study, in all of which compliance with government mandates was a dominant discourse in the research. This meant that opportunities for locally generated initiatives were relatively few and tended to occupy the informal relationships and the liminal spaces between partners rather than constituting the school's or faculty's core business or the centerpiece of its operations.

At the same time, there were instances of localised reshaping by partners of centrally imposed imperatives in all four institutions. One example was the vocational education and training dimension of the teacher education programs. While these offerings needed to conform to the requirements of additional external bodies such as Industry Training Advisory Boards, there was scope for decentralised innovations in curriculum, andragogy and assessment, provided that the local representatives of the university, registered training organisations and other partners were committed to attaining such a result (Harreveld & Danaher, 2004; Parry, Harreveld, & Danaher, in press). These developments often depended on the imagination and determination of talented individuals in the partner institutions and on their collective goodwill in arriving at delivery models that they considered to be as responsive to local community needs as possible within the constraints in which they were required to operate. In this situation value took on a previously undeveloped dimension, being centred on the value adding to the original model that the partners contributed by bringing to bear their respective expertise and knowledge of how to derive flexible outcomes from seemingly unfavourable circumstances.

Conclusion

According to Cardini (2006), "... to challenge current social organization by promoting more progressive relationships, the theoretical definition of partnership has to recognize the issue of power and establish working relationships in which struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues" (p. 412). We concur with this assessment and regard it as a useful synthesis of our response to the research question posed at the outset of the paper: "Which forms of partnerships add value to and are valued by Australian schools and faculties of teacher education?"

More specifically, it is clear that there was considerable valuing by various members of the partnerships of the four schools and faculties of teacher education analysed here. This was evident in the variety and durability of those partnerships and in their generally positive impact on the programs and courses completed by students and on those students' subsequent career trajectories

in diverse educational settings. It was evident also in the university staff members' involvement in other partnerships initiated by other stakeholders, highlighting complex and mutually beneficial webs of relationships among formal educational institutions in local communities.

At the same time, there was equivalent evidence of the operation of both "the issue of power" and "struggle and dissent" (Cardini, 2006, p. 412). This was demonstrated by the need to adhere to government-mandated policies and the requirements of program accrediting bodies. It was signified also by such imperatives as local competition for students, such as between universities and Technical and Further Education colleges, whereby collaboration could be perceived by one or more partners as counterproductive and even inimical to particular members' interests. These tensions undoubtedly imposed strains on the partnerships and potentially contributed to those partnerships being devalued, as least from the perspectives of some partners.

All of this suggests that the valuing of partnerships in contemporary Australian teacher education depends on clear and ongoing attempts to recognise and reward the contributions of individual partners and to render the partnership the sum of all parts, rather than being largely to advantage the host institution. This suggests in turn the requirement for teacher education schools and faculties and their multiple partners to develop strategies that enhance the mutual benefits of their relationships and that fulfil – as far as possible within the real and growing constraints – their separate and shared interests.

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