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Becoming professionals: Partnerships reshaping preservice teachers' transition to full-time teaching

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Abstract:

While strengthened partnerships between University and Schools have been proposed in recent reviews of teacher education (House of Representative Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Caldwell & Sutton, 2010; Donaldson, 2010), there is a need to understand the benefits and challenges for participants of these partnerships. The Teacher Education Centre of Excellence (TECE) in this study is a preservice teacher preparation partnership between a Queensland University, Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) and an Education Queensland school. It was established in response to a mandated reform within the *Improving Teacher Quality* National Partnership Agreement (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). High-achieving Bachelor of Education preservice teachers apply to be part of the 18-month program in the third year of their four-year Education degree. These preservice teachers experience mentoring in partner schools in addition to course work designed and delivered by a DETE appointed Head of Mentoring and a university academic. On completion of the program, graduates will be appointed to South West Queensland rural and remote Education Queensland schools.

This paper analyses participant perspectives from the first phase of this partnership in particular identifying the benefits and challenges experienced by the preservice teachers and the leaders of the program from the participating institutions. A sociocultural theoretical perspective (Wenger, 1998) informed the analysis examining how preservice teachers experience a sense of becoming a professional teacher within a specific employment context. Data from interviews with 6 pre-service teachers and 8 program leaders were analysed inductively through coding of interview records. Findings indicate the importance of strong relationships and opportunity for reciprocal learning through ongoing professional conversations as contexts for preservice teachers to develop an identity as an emerging professional. This research has significance for the ongoing development of this partnership as well as informing the principles for the design of future similar partnerships.

Keywords: Teacher education, partnerships, professional experience, teacher identity

Introduction

Over the last decade reports into teacher education have highlighted the role of strong partnerships between universities and schools in achieving high quality teacher education (Caldwell & Sutton, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2006; House of Representatives Standing

Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Sim, 2010). In Australia, one of the most recent reports, 'Top of the Class' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) proposed that school-university partnerships should be requisite to teacher education. Partnerships that are constructed such that teachers, preservice teachers and teacher educators work in collaboration have the potential to transform teacher education (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell and Cherednichenko, 2009).

While the structures and purposes of existing school-university partnerships may be varied (Sim, 2010), high quality partnerships have in common a "shared responsibility and a willingness to work in partnership with other parties to fulfil that responsibility" (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007, p. 79). In their research into effective and sustainable school-university partnerships, Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell and Cherednichenko (2009) identified that these partnerships are characterised by a shared focus on learning for all stakeholders and on the professional relationships that the partnerships initiates between preservice teachers, teachers and teacher educators.

School-university partnerships provide sites for communities of practice to flourish. Wenger (1998) describes a community of practice as a group sharing common interests, engaging in joint activity and developing a shared repertoire of resources. The construct emerged from theories of situated learning in which novices are situated within a particular context to learn from more experienced practitioners and then taking on increasingly challenging responsibilities of the practice of the expert (Enfield & Stasz, 2011). Through belonging to a community of practice with experienced practitioners, preservice teachers negotiate meaning and identities of competence, as they become more skilled participants in a community. In this current study, the preservice teachers are learning through doing, that is "both absorbing and being absorbed in" the culture of the practice of teaching alongside a mentor and being mentored into the policy environment of Education Queensland (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95).

As preservice teacher-learners engage in the activities of their KGTECE community of practice, it is anticipated that they will learn through the tacit as well as explicit collaboration and in the process of participation be transformed and become prepared for later participation in related events, a process Rogoff (1995, p. 157) describes as "participatory appropriation through guided participation in a system of apprenticeship". It is a situated view of knowing (Bredo, 1994). By gathering qualitative participant responses that focus initially on the experiences that participants identify as beneficial and challenging, it is hoped to identify some of the powerful experiences that shape the valued learning through the TECE.

Background

This paper reports on a recently formed school-university partnership in Queensland Australia. The Teacher Education Centre of Excellence (TECE) was established as a preservice teacher preparation partnership between a Queensland University, Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) and a local state school. It was established in response to a mandated reform within the *Improving Teacher Quality* National

Partnership Agreement (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). The federal funding enabled the establishment of the first phase of the TECE from 2011 until the end of 2013. The university and the school share a common geographic boundary, with the centre being located on the university campus, and within sight of the school.

The TECE provides additional preparation experiences for two cohorts of 25 preservice teachers from the Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Bachelor of Education degrees. High-achieving preservice teachers apply to be part of the 18-month program in their third year of their four-year Education degree. They are matched with a trained and experienced teacher mentor in a local school and encouraged to spend at least 2 hours a week in the school for which the teacher mentors receive payment. Two university units are completed through the TECE with weekly tutorials designed and delivered by a DETE appointed Head of Mentoring and the university appointed lecturer. Through these tutorials TECE preservice teachers are inducted into specific Education Queensland policies and processes, and interact with practitioners from Education Queensland and the university to understand how practice and theory inform one another.

When establishing the parameters of the TECE the partner organisations negotiated a range of further incentives to attract excellent preservice teacher applicants. These have been written into a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the University, DETE and the leading State School. On completion of the two units with excellent results the TECE preservice teachers are granted a full financial scholarship for those two units. They also receive payment, at a first year teacher rate, for their four-week internship in a rural school in South West Queensland. If TECE preservice teachers also achieve an outstanding rating in their employment suitability interview with Education Queensland, the TECE preservice teachers will be offered permanent appointments with the Department of Education in highly sought after metropolitan Brisbane schools, on the understanding that they complete their first two years of service in rural south west Queensland Education Queensland schools. While the range of incentives was designed to be attractive to preservice teachers, investigating the perspectives of students who are enrolled in the TECE will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the incentive package, and inform future decisions. Understanding the perspectives of the leaders from the various partner organisations will also provide insight into the range of benefits and challenges emerging from this unique teacher preparation partnership.

Methods

Preservice teachers enrolled in the TECE and leaders from the University, DET and the state school were invited to voluntarily participate in a twenty minute semi-structured interview six months after the opening of the TECE. The interview questions were designed to help answer the research question, “What benefits and challenges does a KGTECE experience provide for participants?” The views of mentor teachers were not sought at this stage, as the mentoring relationship was still becoming established. It is planned to invite participants, including mentor teachers, to engage in a follow up interview at 16 months, nearing the completion time for the first cohort of TECE preservice teachers.

Six preservice teacher participants were interviewed. The response rate from the preservice teachers might have been higher, if the two TECE mentors who were known to the preservice teachers, had approached them to participate. However to minimise the risk of coercion, the preservice teachers were invited to participate in the interviews by researchers who were not associated with the TECE. Pseudonyms were used to de-identify comments at the point of transcription, and not shared with the TECE mentors until after assessment of the TECE curriculum unit was finalised.

All eight of the TECE leaders agreed to be interviewed. These leaders included a coordinator of the program from within DETE, two leaders from the State School, two leaders of the Faculty of Education, and the two mentors who work with the TECE preservice teachers - the full time mentor employed by DETE and the liaison academic from the University. As each of the leaders could potentially be identified due to their unique positions within the participating institutions, their comments are attributed in general ways in this article by using de-identifying codes such as L1 (leader 1).

Data from the interviews with six pre-service teachers and eight program leaders was analysed inductively through coding of interview records by the four members of the research team. Initial codes were sorted into conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2000), in response to the research question that focussed on the benefits and challenges of the initial KGTECE experience. The coding then moved from a content analysis to reflectively interpret and consider the insights from the responses as a whole (Simons, 2009). This qualitative, iterative approach values participant insights and the interpretation that occurs as participants make meaning from their practices (James, 2007). The data analysis and interpretation design has democratic validity (Anderson et. al., 1994) as participants have had opportunity to review the data and comment on interpretations in a draft of this article.

Results

There was an overwhelming agreement on the benefits of the partnership from the perspectives of the students and leaders interviewed.

Benefits for preservice teachers

While the guarantee of employment was recognised as a benefit by one interviewee (PST5), there were other benefits that were valued highly. The preservice teachers valued supportive mentoring, immediate connections between theory and practice and being treated as professionals.

Supportive mentoring

The relationship with the mentor was valued as a supportive partnership. The opportunity to be regularly observing and engaging in weekly experiences with a mentor and a class over an extended period of time, led to increased confidence in their teaching ability. When preservice teachers complete their university field experiences in schools, the supervising teacher combines a mentor's role with that of an evaluator. The TECE mentor does not have an evaluative responsibility, which has enabled the preservice teachers to be experimental and take risks with their practice, saying "I can try something out in the classroom, reflect, get feedback and then change as necessary." Without an organised program with

mentors, the preservice teachers were also able to negotiate individual goals for development. Some preservice teachers sought a more general understanding, appreciating that “being part of a school community has allowed us to see how a school works.” Another noted “my mentor is really flexible and available to talk to when you need them”. This immediacy was a further benefit.

Immediacy

Immediate connections between the theory at University and TECE experiences were valued. TECE tutorials included invited guests and the preservice teachers valued hearing practising teachers, principals, program coordinators comment on theoretical issues and gaining “honest information about teaching like the child protection information-program.” These experiences also informed the university experience, as they “helped with assessment in other units at uni”. The immediate access to the full time TECE mentor and the physical facilities were also valued. The TECE preservice teachers could access the dedicated secure room at any time to study or to hold group meetings. Printing and kitchen facilities were also appreciated and well used. The room was also used as a meeting room for groups of teachers from the school and for professional development. The location helped establish a sense of belonging, and was a significant resource in creating the community of practice that was shaping learner identity.

Being treated like professionals

The preservice teachers all recognised the benefit of the wide network of professional relationships they were able to develop through the TECE. They reported a sense of feeling “better prepared me for my transition between university and a teaching job” PS6, appreciated “being treated like professionals” PS3 and feeling that the experiences “have accelerated my development as a teacher ” PS4. Additionally, the opportunity to have frequent professional conversations was valued:

I have begun developing but also perceiving myself as a teacher, a professional. I have found on many occasions that new documents or knowledge I have engaged with and shared with my mentor has resulted in both of us learning something new.
PS1

Rather than see themselves as students, the preservice teachers were developing identities as emerging teachers, who could contribute to the growth of others in their profession.

Challenges for preservice teachers

There were several challenges identified by the preservice teachers. The most common challenge was finding the time and energy to commit fully to the program experiences. They wanted to achieve their best results in the program and their other university subjects but experienced the tension of financial pressures as “being students it is difficult to sacrifice paid work over this (we need to support ourselves too) PS1.” For one student, the expectation that she would achieve good results challenged her sense of identity: “personally my challenge is meeting the title of the program (excellence) PS6.”

Elements of the program design also provided challenges for the preservice teachers. It was difficult to build relationships with children, staff and parents in the mentor school when they were there for part of one day a week. Similarly it was challenging to establish rapport with a mentor in the short weekly visits. Another challenge was experiencing a balance between Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary examples in the tutorial discussions. The preservice teachers contributed suggestions and solutions for these challenges for future groups, evidence that they felt that they were valued participants within the community of practice.

Benefits for leaders

Benefits for the leaders can be summarised in three broad themes. Firstly, the opportunity to share a practical commitment to improving the preparation experience for preservice teachers was valued. Secondly, the opportunity to learn from one another and develop awareness of the work of the partner organisations was valued. This has led to a third type of benefit, the potential for an innovation to inform the ongoing work of each organisation.

Shared commitment

From each of the partner organisations, there was a clear commitment to improving the quality of preservice teacher experiences. The TECE was regarded as an opportunity for preservice teaching experiences to be “more practical, more real, deepening the understanding of theory in practice” LP5. There was a recognition that “students are being challenged and extended” LP4. While this shared vision may not be new, the TECE was valued as a practical way that partners could enact the vision:

People are talking about improving teacher quality and they are excited about it and want to be part of it. There’s a general groundswell out there of commitment to improving teacher quality but I think people haven’t known how to go about it. LP1

By learning from the combined perspectives of employer, school practitioners and university academics in partnership, an easier transition experience from preservice teacher to beginning teacher was recognised as a significant benefit. The TECE was seen as a pre-induction experience, so “these people able to walk into any state school and understand how state schools work” LP1. There was acknowledgement that “because schools are busy and don’t always prioritise induction”, the TECE students, “when they become first year teachers, they won’t get lost to the system” LP4. It was also anticipated that that the TECE experience would also lead to preservice teachers developing a new understanding of themselves as teachers, and an enhanced understanding of their professional capacity, becoming teachers

...who can face real world challenges and come up with novel solutions... [and have a] broader commitment to the profession rather than just having a narrow commitment to our own school or to our own region. LP4

While some of these benefits were imagined outcomes for the future, the opportunities within the TECE program, such as the preservice teachers receiving training in Child Protection and Code of Conduct policies, using the Education Queensland electronic portal, scaffolding their reflections within the Education Queensland Developing Performance Policy framework and

delivering professional development sessions for teachers in their mentor schools as part of their university assessment have realised some of these outcomes already.

Understanding each other's worlds

The leadership of the TECE has involved partnership at three levels across the University and school, with the executive leaders meeting regularly and managing the political and legal commitments, the deputy leaders managing the ongoing financial and administration processes and the teaching partners managing the day to day connections with the preservice teachers. Additionally, a governance board meets quarterly to monitor and direct the emerging practices of the TECE. The ongoing processes of problem solving and collaborative program delivery has also enabled a generative partnership; “we are actually partners in it” LP5. All of the leader participants recognised that the positive relationships within the partnership were a significant benefit of the TECE program. Additionally, the shared geographic location (LP3, LP4) enabled frequent meetings and a shared ownership of the TECE.

Opportunity for innovation

The TECE has enabled innovation to occur in each of the partner organisations. As a result of Education Queensland programs and policies being shared openly and discussed with pre-service teachers and University academics, all preservice teachers were given greater access to Education Queensland curriculum materials for their field experiences. Policy insights have also informed the content of other Education units taught by university lecturers. There are ongoing opportunities for ‘mythbusting’ to occur with participants in the TECE leadership group being able to speak to their own stakeholder group to address issues that may arise due to misinformation or a failure to recognise the needs of other stakeholders.

Discussion and Conclusion

These results confirm previous research findings that a shared focus on learning for all, and professional relationships underpin a successful partnership (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell and Cherednichenko, 2009). Additionally, this early evidence also confirms the expectation that experiences within the KGTECE community of practice are enabling preservice teachers to experience a supported process of becoming a professional teacher within a specific employment context.

In a community of practice, an identity of participation is created through recognising the mutuality of participation, so “we become part of each other” (Wenger, 1998. p 56). This was evident to preservice teachers when they observed the institutional leaders engaged in positive partnerships, and when they recognised the synergy between the theory and practice. The design of the TECE experiences also contributed to this growing identity. Identity is negotiated through continuous interaction that entails both interpretation and action (Wenger p. 53). Through the opportunity for continuous interaction between conversation and action, theory and practice, situated within the security of a guaranteed employment trajectory, the students were negotiating identities as beginning teachers. Their learning was meaningful and with the support of a personal mentor, their participation was recognised as competence.

Significantly for the preservice teachers, the leaders each acted as brokers between their separate communities of practice, to create this new community of the TECE. Brokers are able to make new connections across communities of practice, translating and aligning between perspectives. Brokering requires an ability to span boundaries, and facilitate transactions between communities to cause learning in each (Wenger, 1998, p. 109). Evidence from the perspectives of the leaders indicated that there were several leaders who acted as brokers at various levels between the institutions, and that this was a critical reason for the early success of the TECE.

While this evidence relies on a small sample size and the first six months of the experience, this research has significance for the ongoing development of this partnership as well as informing the principles for the design of future similar partnerships.

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