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Developing Partnership through Third Space Activity

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Abstract

This paper reports on a small-scale research investigation into developing partnerships between a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in England and schools based on a collaborative, rather than a cooperative model. Here, a 'deeper' interpretation of collaboration, that is to say 'working together' rather than 'working with' is facilitated through Third Space activity. In essence 'Third Space' suggests coming out of our normal working environment (school or university) and into a neutral 'third space' to design, develop and deliver teacher education with jointly shared understanding and vision. The research was carried out during 2012 and consisted of non-participant observation of meetings between HEI and school staff involved in the partnership and semi-structure interviews with a sample of these staff. The university programme involved was the PGCE secondary programme, however it is important to note that the research suggested that the philosophy of Third Space activity to develop partnership transcends limitations of context. Findings suggest that, despite the ambitious nature of this philosophy, this kind of partnership working has the potential to be transformative for all concerned: HEI tutors, school mentors and student teachers. This in turn benefits pupils in school. As School Direct becomes more widespread in England, it is suggested that the benefits of this kind of working could add significantly to the evolution of effective partnership practice not only in the English context but also in teacher education world-wide.

Keywords

Third space; working together; partnership; teacher education.

Introduction

The Coalition Government White Paper (DfE, 2010) in England set out the intention that more teacher training will be 'on the job', thus turning the spotlight more than ever upon successful partnership between schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In future Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspections, a key criterion for judging the quality of an ITE (Initial Teacher Education) programme will be the depth of the partnership arrangements with particular emphasis being given to the role of school partners in the overall provision. The Education Select Committee's conclusions in 2012 concerning attracting, training and retaining the best teachers emphasise the role of both schools and HEIs and suggest strongly that innovation and commitment to strengthened modes of partnership are required (Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, 2012:78).

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It could be argued that the model of partnership between schools and HEIs in use at present in England is still predominantly a cooperative one, that is to say working *with*, rather than a collaborative one, that is to say working *together* (Hagger and McIntyre, 2006; Edwards and Mutton, 2007; Bronkhorst, Meijer, Koster and Vermunt 2011). This small scale research project set out to investigate a programme of ITE partnership between an HEI and its partner schools, based on collaborative provision, achieved through 'Third Space activity'. Soja (1996:57) developed the theory of Third Space as somewhere in which:

everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.

Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo and Collazo (2004:42) explain that Soja's perception of Third Space means 'looking beyond the binary categories of first [physical] and second [social] spaces' and conclude that in a Third Space, these seemingly opposite binaries can actually work together to generate 'new knowledges'. In terms of the ITE programme investigated in this research, 'Third Space' suggests coming out of our normal working environment (school or university) and into a neutral 'third space' to design, develop and deliver teacher education with jointly shared understanding and vision. All the participants in the research were university tutors and school mentors involved in the secondary PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) programme which forms the basis of the research study.

Research aims

The aims of this research project were:

- To explore and evaluate the strategies employed to develop collaborative provision of teacher training between one HEI and its partner schools.
- To investigate the notion of the use of 'Third Space' to bring about effective collaborative provision.

Background

A crude definition of the status quo in partnership arrangements between schools and HEIs in England would suppose that the student teacher learns theoretical approaches to teaching in the university and then puts them into practice in the school context. Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, and Whitty suggest such simplicity ignores a complex issue, reducing collaborative partnership to bureaucracy and schedules, rather than resting on a vision of working together (Furlong et al., 2007: 43). Ellis, Blake, McNicholl and McNally's (2011) report into teacher education in England tends to agree with Furlong's view of the 'flattening' of complexity. They found that there was an abundance of evidence to show that the university/school partnerships in the training of teachers worked well, yet Ellis (2010) refers to teacher education in England as an 'impoverishing experience'. Here he is not criticising practice per se, but

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rather the overall capacity within ITE for getting the most out of experiences to enable the development of professional knowledge. In a bid to reclaim complexity, Ellis (2010:111) argues passionately for teacher learning to be informed by 'a richer, more complex understanding of experience', rather than giving priority to the acquisition of centrally-prescribed Standards, for example, in England, the Teaching Standards from the Department for Education (DfE, 2012a). His solution is to propose that 'we begin to view the experience from which beginning teachers learn in schools as the object of enquiry by student teachers, teachers and university-based teacher educators' (Ellis, 2010:116). This can be seen perhaps as a plea for a type of partnership which draws on the strengths of all participants and allows 'working together' rather than 'working with'.

The approaches to collaborative provision of teacher training which are put forward in the programme under investigation in this research are: 'boundary crossing' (Akkerman, 2011; Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Engeström and Sannino, 2010; Tsui and Law, 2007); the creation of a 'third space', sometimes also referred to in the literature as a 'hybrid space' (Martin, Snow and Franklin Torrez, 2011; Zeichner, 2010; Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman and Nichols, 2011); 'expansive learning' (Engeström, 2001) and 'enactment'.

In order to work together rather than with, university and school colleagues must first of all cross the boundary of their own space to come together in the neutral third space. Akkerman and Bakker (2011:1) define boundaries as 'socio-cultural differences leading to discontinuity in action or interaction'. They further explain that by crossing a boundary, participants are compelled to reconsider their assumptions and look beyond the known and familiar. In essence, this is about working together in a way in which each constituency's views are respected and in which there is a common moral purpose and joint responsibility for the improvement of both the student teachers' and the pupils' learning. It is a 'third space partnership' forged in and by pedagogy; the pedagogy of teacher education and pupil learning. Zeichner (2010:92) describes the third space as a 'transformative setting' which is less hierarchical in nature, thus encouraging working more closely together. It is an endeavour that will have its own particular challenges because as Martin (2011:299) says: 'the complexities of teaching and learning to teach present formidable challenges to those who work to support and guide teacher learning.'

To have an ITE programme in which the learning experiences are coherent and principled suggests that a significant amount of 'boundary crossing' (trainees, school staff and university staff) needs to take place, not only to build understanding but also to foster expansive learning. For Engeström (2001: 137-138) expansive learning is where people and organisations are learning all the time 'something that is not stable, not even defined ... they are literally learning [new forms of activity] as they are being created'. Through the cultivation of expansive learning it would be hoped that student teachers on this ITE programme will be in a position in the classroom to arrive at successful enactment, that is to say practice with a form of understanding which is flexible and adaptable to possibilities of constant change. Knowing about something and

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knowing how to do something are two different concepts that are often presented in ways that Ball and Forzani (2010:42) describe as the 'endemic gap between knowing about teaching and doing teaching'. In short, many pitfalls are to be found on the path to pedagogical enactment. In the setting up of the programme in this research study, there has been much debate between stakeholders over the term 'enactment'; whether it is an accurate term for what will be hopefully the outcome of successful partnership and indeed what the term means. Through this debate, a conclusion was reached that decided that, for this programme, the term enactment is interpreted as: 'more than merely doing something in the classroom; it is doing it with understanding across a range of contexts.'

Research Methodology and Methods

Case Study and Illuminative Evaluation

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996:66) explain that case studies are ideally suited to the needs and resources of a small-scale researcher because a case study allows a focus on just one element. This study is concerned with the early stages of the revised programme of collaborative practice between an HEI and its partner schools and can be described as a small-scale case study which, as Bell (1999:10) suggests concentrates on a specific situation in depth within a limited time scale. Walker (1978 in Hammersley, 1993:165) defines a case study as 'the examination of an instance in action'. The 'instance in action' here is the first steps towards the goal of HEI tutors and school mentors 'working together' rather than 'working with'. Criticism aimed at case studies considers them to be a weak vehicle for generalisation, however the readers of case studies use their own autonomy and responsibility in a naturalistic way to generalise from theoretical propositions (Burns, 2000:476). This study does not claim to be more than a starting point in this debate.

Gray (2009:152) suggests that case study is often used to evaluate a new process and this is apt in this study. Evaluation often explores what needs to be changed; the change here is from HEI tutors and school mentors 'working with' to 'working together' in the training of teachers. It looks at the procedures put in place to effect this change, as is the case here and will, in some part, ask whether that change has occurred (Warr, Bird and Rackman, 1970). Illuminative Evaluation (Gray, 2009:163) is often associated with case study. It is used to show how existing knowledge is used to inform and guide practical action; the existing knowledge of partnership in this study will inform and guide practical action in the form of suggestions for future practice. Illuminative Evaluation is a flexible and open-ended approach which seeks the views of participants, recognising that there are multiple perspectives on any matter under scrutiny; the research seeks the views of a range of participants and suggests no forgone conclusions.

Methods

The research took place between January and December 2012 and consisted of observation of meetings between HEI tutors and school mentors and subsequent interviews of selected members of these two groups. Within the time scale of the research it was felt that an in-depth look at two strands of the programme would

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be most realisable, so it was decided to concentrate on 'noticing as a disciplined enquiry' and 'coaching and mentoring' only.

Participants in the research were university tutors and professional mentors who are the members of staff in a secondary school who have the overall responsibility for working with the student teachers from the university. In the meetings, they had been selected by the university as colleagues involved in the programme. For the interviews, the selection was made by the researcher from the participants of the strand meetings and chosen to ensure representation of both university tutors and school mentors. The choice was also dependent on their availability and willingness to take part.

Data collection was from three sources. Firstly a document outlining the proposals for the new PGCE programme which gives an overview of the new way of 'working together'. This document was written by a university tutor following discussions with other tutors and school colleagues. The researcher engaged in non-participant observation of one meeting between the HEI and partner schools; and one meeting of each selected strand of the programme. The purpose of the observations was threefold: to familiarise the researcher with the programme discussions; to consider how the participants worked together; to help inform the construction of the interview questions. Participants in the meetings were informed why the researcher was there and anonymity was assured. Notes were taken throughout the meetings and then put into categories, such as: the effectiveness of the procedures to embed the new programme; differences with the previous programme; understanding of terminology; progress so far; challenges. The observation was followed by semi-structured interviews between the researcher and five participants: two university tutors and three teachers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed using comparison of replies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the research was gained from the University Ethics Committee.

All participants could and did give informed consent. It was made clear to all participants that they had a choice not to participate in the research or could withdraw their data at any time from the formal research analysis. No one took this option. All members of the university and school staff and student teachers involved in the collection of data were informed by letter of the purposes and responsibilities of the research and it was made explicit that all data collected by observation or from interviews would be confidential. Full details of how the data would be used and disseminated were explained.

Validity and bias

The researcher is a member of staff from the university and could therefore be seen to be biased towards the university point of view. However, the researcher is not involved in the secondary PGCE programme and so was able to report facts from a neutral stance. Some of the participants were known to the researcher before the research began but in different contexts, so the

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programme was new to the researcher who was not researching something which had been discussed previously. The researcher did not take part in the debates in the meetings and did not deviate or suggest answers in the interviews, again with the aim of maintaining a neutral stance. The care taken to distance the researcher suggests some validity can be claimed for the findings. All the participants were closely involved in the programme under investigation in the research study. This does not mean that they needed to agree with the way the programme was unfolding. However no deliberate action was taken to try and find people as participants who were professed negative critics of the programme and it is acknowledged that the participants were more likely to be positive because of their professed interest.

The Research findings

The new PGCE Programme – document

This document outlines the proposals for the new PGCE programme and had been shared with all those participating in the research before the research began. It notes and discusses the terminology used in the new programme. This terminology was discussed in the meetings and interviews. The notion of working together (collaborative) and not just with (cooperative) is emphasised in the document with an explanation that this means that student teachers, school staff and university staff work together on the design, implementation and evaluation of the training model. This is to be achieved through an expansive model of learning which is developed together; planned together; delivered together; and evaluated together; is also understood together.

Meetings

Present at the first general meeting were twelve colleagues from school and thirteen from the university. This meeting was designated as an invitation to a unique 'third space' event. It was hoped that it would give a unique opportunity to gain coherence between school and university inputs. It was felt by attendees at the meeting that developing partnership through Third Space activity needs what they called an holistic vision because it is like starting again and within schools the professional mentors need passion and strategic influencing. There was agreement that, the principle is that 'we are all on the same team' and that despite there being fluidity across boundaries [between university and school], more would be helpful. The big issue for the school participants in the general meeting was the philosophy behind the programme which they felt would be a mindset change for mentors.

The second meeting was specifically called to further the work of the Noticing and Observing strand. This strand aims to move trainees from simply noticing what goes on in the classroom to competently observing in detail and thus developing effective practice. Present were three colleagues from school and three from the university. The participants were invited to discuss a table setting out the proposed plan for the strand and notes were made of their suggestions and ideas. The meeting, which seemed generally positive, afforded an example of working together, both physically (in that university and schools were in the same physical space) and conceptually (in that university and schools were actively engaged in discussion of an agreed philosophy).

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The third meeting was convened to discuss the Coaching and Mentoring Strand. This strand aimed to understand the continuum of the professional learning conversation which involves telling student teachers what to do in the first instance and develops into conversations concerning effective practice where both parties contribute fully to the discussion. Present were four colleagues from school and three from the university (although only one from the university stayed throughout the meeting). In this meeting, participants emphasised that what was intended was in fact very complex - collaboration, not cooperation - and that it needs to grow slowly by tapping into all concerned so all gain from it; pupils, mentors and schools, tutors and university. The meeting was again generally positive and ideas were constantly generated from the possibilities offered by working together

Interviews

The participants felt that partnerships between schools and the university had been 'effective' up to now, but the difference with this new approach seemed to be based on the fact that the university had made significant efforts to work more with schools in the following ways: co-ordinating meetings with professional mentors from all the schools in the area; coming in and working with mentors in school to see what is happening; comparing university tutor and mentor judgement of lessons; setting up local area meetings where university tutors and professional mentors discuss the programme, any problems or issues, and share knowledge and success. All this leads to 'a greater awareness of what's happening' (school mentor).

There seemed to be shared understanding amongst the participants about the difference between working together and working with, with several strong hints of a preference for working together:

It's more of an equal partnership ... a much deeper relationship than simply working with somebody (school mentor).

Working together demands a relationship ... based on openness and trust and honesty between all partners in order to achieve true collaboration (university tutor).

Working together has the potential to benefit all three parties; school colleagues, university colleagues and the trainees.

Trainees benefit because I think for them it makes it easier to see the impact of what they're learning at university in the school environment ... because it is more joined up. School teachers benefit because [it is good for them] to be considering the theory behind what they do or the different ways of doing what they do. University colleagues benefit from being in schools seeing how things are working in the classroom or seeing ... ideas they may have, research they may be doing, as working practically (school mentor).

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The participants' definitions of 'working together' tallied and seemed convinced and clear. So were they equally at home with the other terminology which underpins the programme? Boundary crossing was variously described as between university and school, theory and practice, subjects, cross-phased work with primaries. Everyone defined Third Space thoughtfully, particularly discussing the fact that it was not so much a physical place as a conceptual one. Expansive learning was a phrase with which participants were not very comfortable, however enactment was readily defined in the same way as in the programme document by everyone. Interview participants 'definitely' felt that the meetings between the HEI and schools which they had attended allowed working together:

You had school colleagues thinking very practically about how the strand was going to be delivered ... and then you had university colleagues that were able to question on the basis of that outline structure in more depth' (school mentor).

They felt that if it had been working with, the meeting simply would not have happened.

Drawbacks to the new programme revolved mostly around 'time'; 'It's fitting it all in, you know' (school mentor). Other difficulties were: getting everybody on board; the financial aspect and logistics of moving people to get them together physically; change - 'because as a school you are going to have to shift and move and as a university you are going to have to shift and move and any change is uncomfortable' (school mentor); conflict - if 'the wider partnership believes in this [the philosophy of the new programme], but the schools believe in that [a different philosophy]' (university tutor); quality control - if we are all working together, then where are the responsibilities?

Finally participants were asked to reflect; firstly on any significant differences with previous practice and secondly on the overall effectiveness of the process. The process had been 'evolution, not revolution' (university tutor). They had started the year with a feeling of trepidation concerning all the things they thought looked new but then realised that 'it doesn't actually look that different ...we can take this on board bit by bit ... rather than having to just deal with massive change all at once' (school mentor). Mentors in school had 'moved it [the core stuff] on to a significantly different level' in terms of what they are doing and how they are doing it. There was far more awareness of the need to go slowly 'because if we invest in the initial stages now ...they [student teachers] are far more prepared to go into that second sustained enactment phase' (school mentor). One school mentor had found it personally rewarding: 'it's rejuvenated me and my attitude to what I do in school, it really has, it's great'. A university tutor concluded:

if we can broadcast [this] much, much wider, and get a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, a sense of development, a sense of fulfilment, a sense of academic rigour and challenge and all those sorts of things ... it would enrich everyone's life, both professionally and personally and would give greater

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meaning to what we do; pupils, staff, university lecturers, anyone that's involved in our partnership.

Discussion and concluding thoughts

The findings of this research suggest that the new PGCE programme based on the notion of bringing school and HEI partners in teacher education into a 'Third Space' and aiming to 'work together' rather than 'work with' is ambitious. The interview participants had been immersed in the Third Space philosophy of the programme and remain committed to it, others might not be. Although they acknowledged a seemingly simple way of working – after all, working together sounds straightforward on the surface and does not appear to be greatly different to working with, if at all - actual involvement in the programme had unearthed the complexities of making this work: finding enough time; developing trust to work equally together; the amount of people involved; geographical distances between people; understanding the basic concepts of Third Space and other terminology crucial to the programme; financial implications of moving people around; embracing change; many people embracing a certain philosophy; leadership within collaboration, can it or should it exist and what happens without it?; having patience. Both HEI and school colleagues pointed to a gradual process over several years of schools and HEIs drawing closer together to bring about more effective partnership; 'a noticeable difference' a school mentor suggested which had started five or six years previously. This could suggest that Third Space activity simply (despite its complex nature) builds on the process of improving partnership relations for the good of all. Getting 'everybody' on board in an ambitious programme such as this adds to the complexity and difficulty and in turn to the possible rejection of the programme.

The interview participants were committed to the programme and generally, but not completely, comfortable with the terminology. Third Space afforded some fascinating pictures of the desired 'deeper' thinking as participants acknowledged that they knew what it was despite the fact that they had to think about how to actually describe it.

Did they agree with Soja (1996:57) who developed the theory of Third Space as somewhere in which 'everything comes together'? All participants did see Third Space as the coming together of schools and HEIs. How did their definitions sit with Zeichner's (2010:92) description of Third Space as 'transformative'? In as much as the data show throughout that they are in favour and enthusiastic about Third Space, they did. Crossing the perceived boundaries between two linked but potentially discontinuous cultures – that of the school and that of the HEI – compels members of those spaces to reflect, to reconsider their assumptions, presumably to be transformed into the new form of partnership, working together.

Meeting in the Third Space is intended to lead to 'working together' which, it seems from the whole research project, appears to be eminently preferable to just 'working with'; the latter not to be discarded, but to be enriched by the former. Throughout the literature, the programme details, the meetings and the

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interviews, the importance of the distinction was accepted and the new way of 'working together and not just with' has been embraced. In all meetings, how school and university 'fit together' was actively explored. The enthusiasm for 'working together' was borne out in the interviews where all participants were not only in favour, but very clear about what it meant to work together. The initiative of the university coming to schools to work together with them was not lost on the school interview participants who were most appreciative of the trust shown to them by university colleagues wanting their experience.

Developing partnership through Third Space activity is ambitious, but it is possible. One school mentor summed it up as 'pain' but the pain seems necessary to arrive at something worthwhile. The passion for Third Space working was evident throughout the research; it must be said that it was the researcher who insisted on the balance of 'difficulties' and 'drawbacks' as they were not automatically forthcoming and were accepted but not seen to be any reason for not going ahead. The 'pain' brought rewards: rejuvenation, personal reward, excitement, fulfilment, challenge, enrichment.

If we revisit the aims of the research: an exploration and evaluation of collaborative provision of teacher training between one HEI and its partner schools has been accomplished by this research within the limitations of scale; the notion of Third Space to bring about effective collaborative provision has been investigated. As teacher education in England undergoes yet more change with the introduction of School Direct which 'allows schools to grow their own new teachers by giving them opportunity to recruit and train their own staff' (DfE, 2012b) and consequently changes the nature of partnership between schools and HEIs, it is recommended that the philosophy within 'working together' through Third Space activity continues to be embraced and researched as a fundamental way of achieving excellent teacher education and training of student teachers, and hence excellent teachers of children and young people.

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