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'Put it there, Partner!'
A Case Study of an organic partnership with a school

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a case study of an organically developing partnership between a Higher Education Institution (HEI) and a primary school. The paper gives a brief overview of the context of current partnership working and some of the challenges this presents. It also briefly explores the impact on partnership working of government initiatives such as School Direct. The paper goes on to present the findings of the case study where the author, a university tutor (teacher educator) has developed a partnership with a school over the past two and a half years. The partnership journey begins with supporting the student to engage a challenging class in literacy work and then continuing to support her through her NQT year. The paper discusses how a practitioner research opportunity brought several ITE stakeholders together in terms of impact on learning and development and how the partnership is developing symmetrically as a result. I have found that effective partnership can start this way and that a partnership that develops to the benefit of all stakeholders: school, HEI, me, NQT/RQT and current PGCE students is more effective in terms of sustainability, innovation and collaboration. The paper goes on to explore future implications in terms of School Direct planning and working.

Key words

Partnership, collaboration, symmetric, innovation.

Introduction

Context

In the 2010 white paper 'The Importance of Teaching', Michael Gove urges that a greater percentage of *training* (italics mine) take place in school. He states that:

We know that teachers learn best from other professionals and that an 'open classroom' culture is vital: observing teaching and being observed, having the opportunity to plan, prepare, reflect and teach with other teachers

(Department for Education, 2010:19).

Whilst I would raise no contention with most of this statement, it does suggest a pure apprenticeship model that whilst helping student teachers with how to teach and some of what to teach it may not support their understanding of professional decision-making and help them see why they need to make certain classroom decisions. Teaching is an ever-changing context that is highly complex where a decision made in one context may not be appropriate in another. Schulman (2004) exemplifies it like this:

After 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching.....is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented...The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of

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comparable complexity would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster. (2004:504).

Gove would argue that 'Too little teacher training takes place on the job' (2010:19) suggesting that the more experience student teachers get in school, the more knowledgeable and effective they will be. Ellis however argues otherwise. She argues that 'a fundamental problem with England's design for pre-service teacher education is an impoverished version of experience in school' (2010. P.106). She suggests that with school-based teacher education, learning in school, or gaining experience, essentially becomes receiving knowledge, becoming acculturated to the school's approaches and where good practice is seen as reproducing what is observed. Teacher learning is situated, learning does happen whilst teaching in the classroom, but the question is what do you learn? Anecdotal evidence I have collected from primary PGCE students is that one of the over-arching factors that contribute to the success or failure of a placement is their ability to fit in to the school context. What they learn therefore is that conformity and compliance are essential skills to pass. Davies (1997) reports on the challenges that student teachers face to discuss anything that may bring them into conflict around beliefs and values of a subject taught. Britzman (2003) takes this a stage further by suggesting that therefore, being a competent teacher, passing a placement is based on the absence of conflict. However, conflict can be positive; developing new understandings and new perspectives on situations is surely a positive thing for practising teachers and mentors?

Nationally, primary core PGCE allocations are dropping and School Direct allocations rising, therefore school-led teacher education is the current coalition Government's teacher education policy. One of the challenges for the initial teacher education community of practice is partnering with school alliances in such a way so that issues I have addressed thus far - the complexity of learning, the need to develop professional decision-making skills based on understanding, knowledge creation not acquisition and dialogue to develop understanding - are not forgotten.

Kiggins and Ferry posit that partnership working is the most effective way to establish knowledge. They state that:

Although learning can occur from each of the three learning sources, the most effective type of learning environment occurs when they combine together. Hence, it is the interaction among these three sources (Community Learning, School Based Learning & Problem Based Learning) that establishes the deep learning process of knowledge building. This process is on-going, iterative, sometimes ill-defined, and results in sustained, life-long learning' (Kiggins and Ferry 1999).

Problem-based learning they link to university-based learning. They discuss the nature of the interaction between these three sources as being about reconstructing experience rather than replicating it so that knowledge is constructed rather than just acquired. Darling-Hammond calls for a tight coherence between these three areas. She states that an effective partnership has a 'tight coherence and integration between course work and clinical work in school.... that creates an almost seamless experience of learning to teach.' (2006:7). She goes on to explore what that might look like in practice and how student learning can best be developed:

In some particularly powerful programs, faculty staff who teach courses also supervise and advise student teachers and sometimes even teach children and teachers in placement schools, bringing together these disparate program elements through an integration of roles' (Darling-Hammond, 2006:7).

The suggestion here is that any programme/unit of study/learning experience that looks to bridge the perceived divide between theory and practice, practical and academic and create coherence between them is going to be a powerful learning experience. However this approach will very rarely happen quickly and of course, our partner schools often have different priorities.

Below is a typology from my own experience and from the literature referenced in this paper, of school relationships with HEIs. It illustrates how different schools are involved in ITE and helps provide a context for this paper

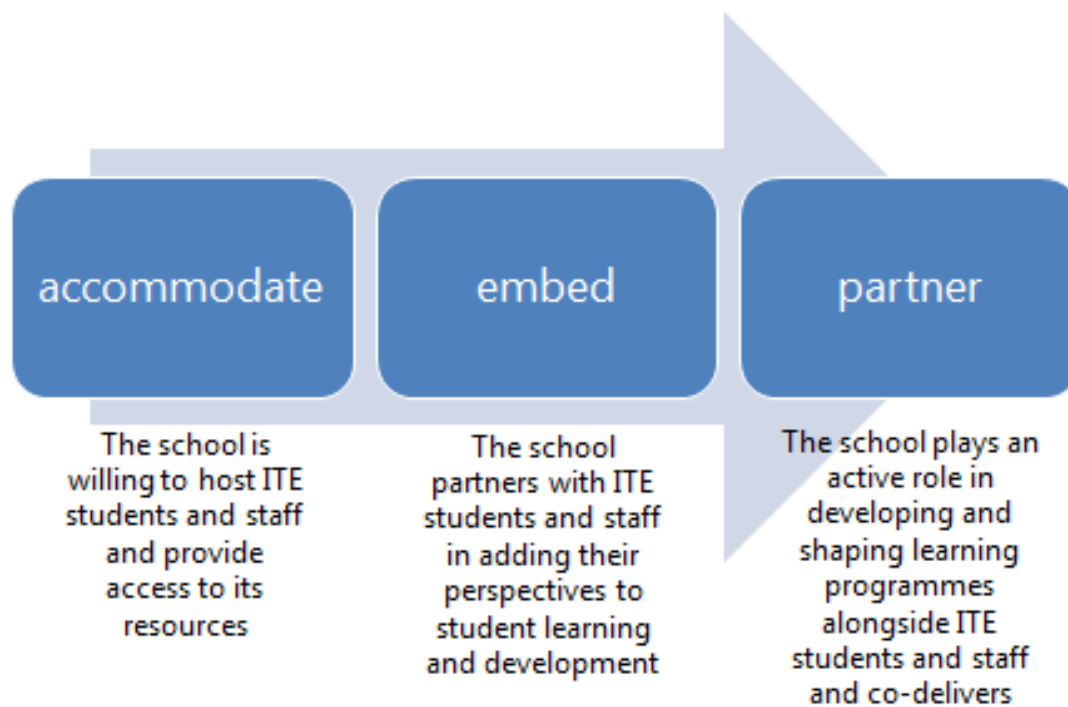


Figure 1. A typology of school involvement in Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

Here I have taken the idea of partnership and looked at ways that schools can and do get involved in working with universities. The goal I believe is the third of the three stages, 'partner', but the question of 'how' still remains. Furlong (2008) cited in Scott Douglas (2012) suggests that the shift to a more school-led teacher education has led to different interpretations of partnership emerging as political priorities change. Does this therefore mean that it is politics that drives whether schools become partner with ITE providers? Schools face untold pressure to perform to targets. Some years ago, level 4 was the target for children at the end of their primary career. Increasingly there are pressures on schools to gain higher percentages of level 5 and level 6. Failure to do so results in an Ofsted visit with all the pressure that that brings to stay away from a 'notice to improve'. However, despite this pressure there are many schools looking to partner with ITE providers in new and innovative ways. Wallis (2012) cites Lock and Spear (1997) and Ofsted (2010) who advocate that a 'strong partnership arrangement is vital to high quality outcomes in initial teacher education'. (2012:3). Both Wallis (2012) and Scott Douglas (2012) present models of partnership that involve booklets, outcomes, directed activity, which is very helpful, useful and necessary for Quality Assurance and parity issues. However, this case study presents an approach of something a little more organic. This is not being advocated as a model for ITE partnership per se, but as a tool to consider and make the most of less traditional partnership opportunities when they present themselves. This case study seeks to evaluate the impact of this organic approach in terms of

student teacher learning, children's learning and a university tutor and school-based colleagues' professional development.

The Case Study

The development of this research

The events discussed within this case study developed organically without an initial plan to research. However they are now being reflected on and conceptualised to look at alternative models of partnership working with schools. The focus was: 'what learning opportunities are created by a more organic approach to partnership?' in this single case of practice.

During 2011, I was contacted by a student to support her on her final assessed block placement with engaging a particularly challenging year 5 class with writing, especially the boys. A Department for Education report from 2012 titled 'What is the evidence for writing?' stated that:

Evidence suggests that boys perform less well than girls in writing. Research evidence has identified a range of factors behind their underperformance
(Daly, 2003; Estyn, 2008; DfES, 2007) (Department for Education, 2012: 4).

The report identified that active-learning, that is to say boys having ownership and the effective use of IT, are instrumental to boys being engaged. As a result, a two day writing workshop around the theme of pirates was developed and carried out. Evaluation of the project demonstrated that the whole class was engaged with the approaches used, particularly the boys. The approaches used in the writing project supported the student to develop more active approaches to writing that involved pace and teacher in role.

The student was successful on her placement and moved into her Newly Qualified Teacher year. The Deputy Head Teacher contacted me (2012) and asked me again to come and support the student and as a result the Deputy Head Teacher began to become more involved in the PGCE programme, offering to take more students on assessed placements. Later that year, I was able to invite the school to become a pilot for X University's Primary PGCE School Embedded Learning' and Creative week (2013 start). For this pedagogic approach, schools chosen for their geography, engagement with HEI and quality of teaching host 28-30 students for two days per week at the beginning of the programme. The students work through a process of focused observation, reflection and access to information, discussion and application over each week, focusing on a teacher standard per week. This is then developed through core study in the university. The same students then return to their school in March for a creative week linked to a Masters module called 'The Creative and Effective Curriculum'. Here they plan and teach a creative themed week in teams.

Having this growing relationship with the school facilitated the development of a writing workshop (my own practitioner research Nov 2013) looking at creative thinking in higher attaining writing. This two day workshop allowed me to return and work with the recently qualified teacher (who began the process) and develop links with other staff in the school. As a result of this research I was then invited to speak at their Children's University graduation.

The partnership has then continued where the same recently qualified teacher, her more experienced colleague and fifteen Year 5 children came up to university (March 2014) to be part of some mock interviews for teaching posts helping prepare PGCE students for job interviews. This supported the teachers in CPD as neither had been involved in interviewing for teaching posts. Then a group of PGCE students and I delivered an introduction to persuasive writing which led to the

children then going away to write some persuasive leaflets and/or podcasts on 'why train to teach at X University'.

Methodology

Whilst this piece of work was not originally planned and designed as a piece of qualitative research, practitioner research approaches have been observed. As a result, the process of working, observations and findings from data collection are presented in a case study of the developing partnership. The research question was: 'what learning opportunities are created by a more organic approach to partnership' in this single case of practice. I, as teacher educator, sought to strengthen my ability to support a newly/recently qualified teacher and also sought to develop strengths-based, reciprocal relationships with other members of the staff team within her school. The impact on my own professional development was also considered. The benefits would be tangible for me in developing my practice, the newly qualified teacher in developing hers, the school in developing their pedagogical understanding and the children would benefit from some specialised teaching. A case study was chosen as the most effective method because it allows, as Denscombe states to, 'go into sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation.' (2010:53). Also because of the complexity of relationships within this scenario, a case study allows exploration of their interrelatedness. Denscombe also draws attention to the fact that case studies 'tend to be holistic rather than deal with isolated factors' (2010:53). Whilst there are several episodes within the development of this partnership, in order to answer the research question, the whole must be considered. One of the challenges with using this approach is generalisability. Punch (2009) states that with a case study one can only suggest rather than attempt to prove and what I will aim to do, through the figures above and through interpretation of the findings is develop propositions. Through the process of drawing this work together, all participants: students, teachers, children were given multiple opportunities to withdraw and I have given voice to all the participants who have journeyed with me so far.

The research took place in a large urban primary school, where there is a higher than average percentage of free school meals. Both class teachers and the Deputy Head Teacher involved were all female, one of whom had been a recent student on X University's primary PGCE course. My involvement was as a support to her with a class exhibiting low engagement with literacy and challenging behaviour. Data collected included my own reflective journal through the process, comments from the children at the end of my workshop and notes from a semi-structured interview involving all three teachers involved. Validity was sought through the process of semi-structured interviews: Perspectives on the process, not particular answers were sought.

Initial observations

In trying to illustrate this process I have created a diagram which looks at how the involvement of stakeholders increased over time. It also, through the use of double headed vertical arrows, demonstrates how each of the key partnership activities brought together more stakeholder involvement so that at the time of writing all five stakeholders have been impacted by the writing project (my practitioner research).

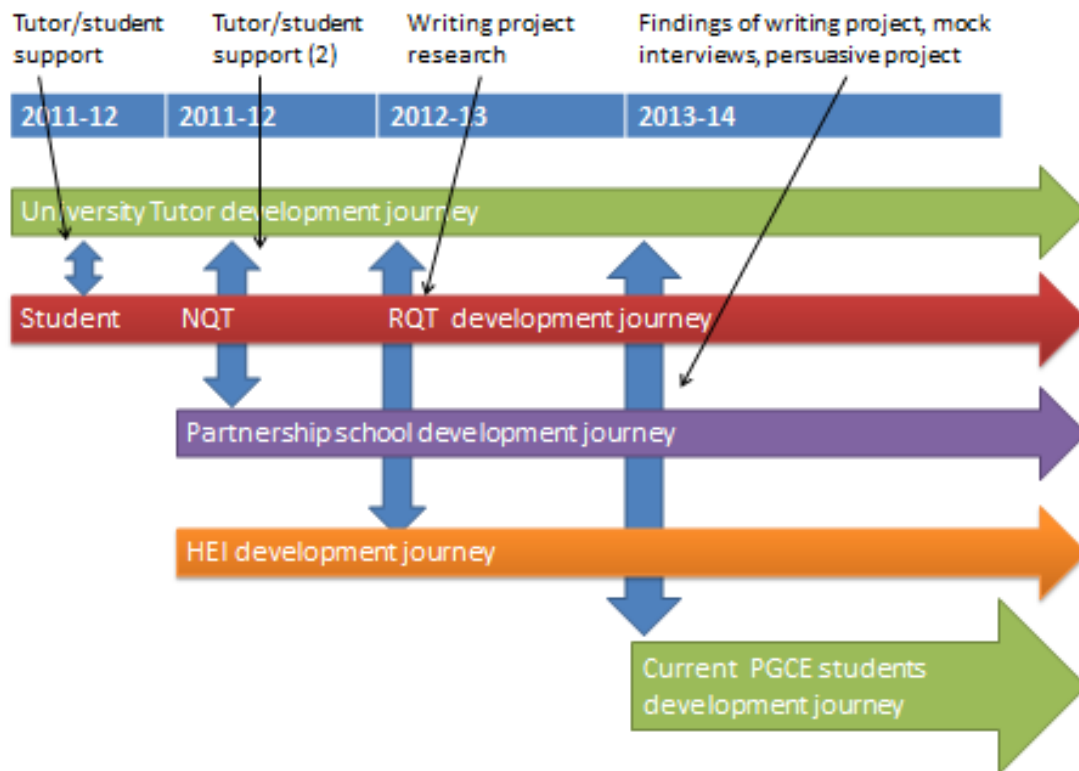


Figure 2. A timeline of stakeholder involvement and activity.

Some interesting points can be drawn from the above figure. Firstly that it begins with one ITE tutor supporting one student. The school, where the student was teaching added additional support and then Practitioner Research (in this case the writing project) acted as a catalyst for all stakeholder involvement. The University tutor has a context for carrying out research and the partner school and recently qualified teacher also benefit through CPD. The HEI benefits through output at a conference or published paper and current students feel the benefits of research-informed teaching. Perhaps this approach could be replicated across the sector: tutor/student support followed by practitioner research (some form of CPD activity) followed by reciprocal activity. The intention is that this continuum could continue now that reciprocity has to an extent been achieved.

The National College for School Leadership's (NCSL) 2011 publication 'Learning about HEI partnership in Learning Networks' gives examples of a variety of types of partnerships that schools have with HEIs. Under the heading of effective partnerships, they discuss an 'asymmetric partnership' where the HEI supports practitioner research. They posit a CPD focus, where the HEI provides CPD for staff and they go on to discuss a symmetric partnership where partners work together to create new knowledge. The illustration I have suggested above perhaps moves from asymmetric and it is almost as if the symmetry is an evolving process. In fact reading considered for this paper (Stuart and Alger 2011, Kiggins and Ferry 1999, Lock and Ferry 1997, Davies 1997, Darling-Hammond 2006) either imply, state or work with a fixed model of partnership. The NCSL's suggestions are all fixed, no room is given for the evolution of a partnership and all the models and papers considered miss the element of reciprocal learning.

Findings emerging from the case study

This piece of work sought to explore the question: What learning opportunities are created by a

more organic approach to partnership'? At this point in the partnership evolution process, there are five stakeholders upon whom impact can be explored: myself (university tutor), the NQT now RQT (Hannah – pseudonym used), the school where Hannah works, the children Hannah teaches, current PGCE primary students and the HEI provider (These are all represented above in Figure 2).

One of the key findings from this piece of research was that approaching the school to engage with me in the writing project (CPD and practitioner research) acted as a catalyst for developing the partnership. Whilst the process did not begin here, it did become the point where impact was felt by all stakeholders. Initially the effects of the practitioner research were felt just by Hannah and her class. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews supports this:

As a teacher, I believe that working in partnership with Adrian Copping has inspired my own teaching and made me reflect more on why I decided to become a teacher and how I can improve my own practice.

(Hannah RQT)

Further on in the interview, Hannah stated:

More recently, Adrian has run a Murder Mystery higher level thinking day with my current Year 5 Class at XXXX Academy and all of my class had a fantastic day and learnt alot. I think my class benefitted from the creativity and the excitement of being taught by a historical character.

(Hannah RQT)

This was supported by an entry in my own reflective diary:

This second day went a lot better than expected. A lot of the children were able to engage with the different types of writing asked of them and enjoyed the real examples, especially of the coded letters. They were able to draw on the creative thinking skills from yesterday and I have been impressed at some of their writing, especially compared to what they usually produce

(reflective diary extract – lines 64-68).

As the interview with school staff continued, Andrea (pseudonym) the Deputy Headteacher and Laura (pseudonym), the Literacy co-ordinator were able to shed a wider perspective.

Laura: Well, I popped in for the session before break yesterday and I was surprised to see so many of the children engaged. Adrian used approaches that I didn't expect to work with this class..

Andrea: So, is there some CPD for staff then do you think?

Laura: Well certainly for some of our staff who might shy away from this then yes.

Andrea: Adrian, would you be willing to broaden this out?

(extracts from semi-structured interview).

This practitioner research acted as a catalyst that impacted upon Hannah, her class and then also the school. As a result of the growing professional relationship between myself and the Deputy Head and other members of the staff team, we agreed upon other opportunities for further partnership working, mock interviews and a seminar at university. The impact of this is again discussed in the interview:

They developed their questioning skills by interviewing the PGCE students and received a seminar on persuasive writing. Many of our children come from challenging backgrounds and few of their families have been to university so I think this day made them more aspirational (Hannah RQT).

The impact here on the current PGCE students has been felt in two ways. Firstly in response to the above extract; the quotation above is in relation to a careers day, where students prepare for interview for a teaching post and are interviewed by local Head Teachers. Informal feedback from the students interviewed was that they found it helpful to be interviewed by a 'school council' as some may have to do for interview and it deepened their understanding of what children want from a teacher. And secondly; the impact was also felt through the results of my research on my teaching and therefore impacting upon their own practice in schools. It also gave some PGCE volunteers an opportunity to plan and team teach a seminar on persuasive writing with me, an opportunity that they got a lot from:

It was really useful to team teach with you because although we have planned English a lot, seeing how you do it for a real context, helping you with structure and ideas helped my confidence but then working with you and seeing how you respond to the needs of the children and use your plan flexibly was really helpful for us to experience'
(Rosie (Pseudonym) primary PGCE student, interview).

However, one of the key outcomes of this research is the journey itself and how this partnership started. Interestingly the partnership began with Hannah and myself (Hannah's Personal Tutor and primary English tutor). Hannah asked me during her extending placement to support her with a really challenging class. The journey has evolved over two and a half years and it is a different school where Hannah now teaches, which is a stakeholder in this evolving partnership rather than the school where I first supported her.

The impact on my professional development has been great. I have been able to develop creative thinking and teaching in English in a context of engaging boys in challenging classes and this has informed my own thinking and the pedagogical approaches I take when preparing student teachers. It also ensures I am aware of current practice in schools. The HEI has benefited as they have closer partnership working with a large school in an area of high placement demand and a school who are looking to be a partner with the university in a variety of ways.

Discussion

Within the literature discussed earlier in this paper, one of the goals of partnership working is knowledge building. Recognition is given to the fact that knowledge is constructed through a variety of contexts: university-based seminars, problem-based learning and situated learning. Recognition is also given to the fact that learning is not something that is linear and easily defined, but actually ill-defined, iterative and evolving. The case study results I think bear this out. Within the data, Hannah stated that working with me over the last two and a half years made her reflect more on why she decided to become a teacher and how she could improve her own practice. Hannah was taught a lot by me during her PGCE year, but over the last two and a half years, she has been able to construct new knowledge through a year and a half of being an NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) and then an RQT (Recently Qualified Teacher), through her experiences of curriculum, staff, parents and children. This ongoing development of knowledge and understanding will continue, so it is iterative in a way because whilst Hannah has been teaching and therefore doing something over and over again, she has developed her practice as she has taught, not just repeated it. Therefore the process of learning and knowledge building, exemplified through two and a half years of this partnership process is

fundamental to its success. Therefore the process of partnership working takes time. The literature also views partnership working from a Quality Assurance (QA) perspective. Partnership agreements, shared paperwork, forms, handbooks appear to be foundations of strong partnerships. However what can happen is partnership working within ITE means asking a school to work with you, giving them a handbook, handing them some students which can lead to dissatisfaction. The findings of this case study would show that this is what I have termed 'accommodation' at best and not effective partnership. To move on along the figure 1 continuum, time is needed; time to construct new learning, time to develop involvement and time to develop strong relationships.

The literature also discusses partnership from an organisation-led perspective. This case study demonstrates that actually effective partnership can evolve from an individual professional relationship between ITE tutor and student and grow into other iterations depending on how relationships develop.

The literature discussed (primarily Darling-Hammond, 2006) does draw attention to the power of a university tutor supporting students and teaching children and staff in school and the power of that has been demonstrated in the case study findings. School staff are clearly impacted by new and innovative approaches that university tutors can bring and are keen to be developed. However, the literature on partnership working does not give examples of children and staff coming to university to be taught or look at the power of a tutor team-teaching with student teachers. In some earlier research (Copping, 2012) I explore the effects of team-teaching with a group of students. The research suggested that planning with, teaching with and evaluating with your tutor is a more significant learning experience that being shown how to do it and then being asked to go and do it. I think this case study shows the same. The extract from data seems to suggest that the experience helped cement the planning, teaching and reflection process and developed confidence in their ability as practitioners. Whilst the data does state that for the children to be involved in university-based activity helped raise their aspirations there is further work to do on the benefits to learning for them and also as CPD for the teaching staff who attended. This is something that was not probed in the initial research but is an area that has emerged through the research process.

The case study also demonstrates the power of practitioner research as a catalyst for maximum stake holder involvement in partnership. NCSL literature claims that true 'symmetric partnership' is an unrealised aspiration and actually I do believe that whilst this case study demonstrated that practitioner research as an activity brought buy-in for all stake holders, it was led by me. The next steps could be moving into a more symmetric partnership where practitioner research is developed for the mutual benefit of both school and HEI. It could be argued that the approach in this case study is just 'accommodation'. The school accommodated me in my work on creative thinking and higher attaining writing and it was only as this was observed and engaged with by staff that it became more reciprocal as CPD for staff.

There is much future work to be done in this area, especially if the goal is for true symmetric partnership. I am looking to take this work further as I develop partnership with a PGCE School Direct alliance in an area at a significant distance from X University. A bespoke PGCE is being planned collaboratively with local Head Teachers and myself. Validation requirements have been followed and other constraints such as assignment deadlines and placement dates. But the structure of the rest of the programme is currently being developed to the mutual benefit of schools, and student journey. Opportunity for CPD for myself in terms of leadership and management and for school colleagues in terms of teaching and learning in higher education are continuing to be explored. We are also collaboratively exploring innovative pedagogical opportunities for bringing primary and secondary student teachers and school staff together.

Conclusion

The practice of partnership in ITE is as Cope and Stephen describe '*often a source of tension and difficulty*' (2001:1). They also suggest that there is a seeming dissonance between school context and university context, where ITE takes place. This dissonance can be a site of struggle for students, encountering different messages from the providers and therefore sometimes feel like the victim of being stretched into different directions; a medieval method of torture. Ways in which universities and other ITE providers try to overcome this is to provide guidance booklets, systems and partnership tutors in an attempt to give both messages more coherence. But I think there are too many variables for this to work effectively. For example, different people interpret documents in different ways, do not fully subscribe to the guidance, or are perhaps keen not to 'lose' the school, and therefore places, so perhaps acquiesce to school requests a bit too easily.

This paper attempts to suggest another approach to partnership working that is not about systems, booklets, imposition and accommodation but one that has relationship and collaboration at its heart. By maintaining professional relationships with students as they move from the university classroom to the school classroom a more symmetric partnership with a school can be developed. This paper suggests that over a period of time a university tutor can provide areas of support which can then provide openings for practitioner research and that (as figure 2 shows) can give all stakeholders something tangible in terms of learning and development. This partnership activity can then open doors for deeper levels of collaborative working that benefit the tutor, the NQT/RQT concerned, current students feeling the benefits of research-informed teaching, the school through CPD and the university by providing ways to tap into wider partnership opportunities. This case study has so far been going for two and a half years and Hannah will start a job at a new school in September 2014, so whilst opportunities with her current school continue, perhaps more will open up in her new context.

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