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Building Partnerships for success: a model for working with teacher trainers, mentors and trainees

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Building Partnerships for success: a model for working with teacher trainers, mentors and trainees

Author: Tracy Wallis

Abstract:

The paper describes the quality of learning that occurred between school based mentors, primary teacher trainees and their tutors in a Higher Education institution (HEI) in England. The programme upon which this research is based is an innovative way of working and is presented here as a unique delivery approach to Professional Development. The programme consisted of a series of taught sessions specifically designed to enhance trainees' confidence in teaching primary languages. Running concurrently with the taught sessions were workshops where mentors were engaged in developing the skills required to observe and give constructive feedback on primary language lessons. Although this programme was the vehicle to deliver continuing professional development (CPD), the impact upon ways of developing working with trainees and mentors and the implications on learning for the wider initial teacher education (ITE) community are far reaching. The development of the key principles of this model of learning is a highly efficient and effective way of developing partnership. The generic nature of these principles makes them transferable and applicable to other areas of working with mentors and teacher trainees in all sectors. Partnership is defined here as the relationship that exists between the provider and mentors in schools.

Keywords: Partnership; learning; mentors; teacher trainees; professional development; initial teacher education; primary languages.

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Background

This paper is concerned with building partnerships between school based mentors, teacher trainees and university tutors. The vital role of partnership is highlighted by Lock and Spear (1997), who responded to radical reforms that took place in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses during the mid-1990s. One of the most important of these changes was that trainee teachers spend more time in school with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) working in partnership 'to plan, guide, support and assess students' school-based work' (Lock and Spear 1997, p. 253). Such changes led to the increased involvement of teachers in ITE and having a much more significant role in trainees' development as practitioners. Hobson (2002, p.5), meanwhile, underlines what he terms as the 'major importance of mentoring' and adds:

'a number of influential theories of professional learning also point to the learning potential of having trainee professionals work closely with experienced practitioners or 'mentors', and such theories provide insights into the different forms that effective 'mentoring' might take' Hobson (2002, p.6).

A strong partnership arrangement is vital to high quality outcomes in initial teacher education (Lock and Spear, 1997; OfSTED, 2010). Although partnership at University X, where the research reported on in this paper took place, was judged as 'outstanding' according to OfSTED (2007 and 2010), the team at this institution is continually looking at building and developing partnership because we feel that this is crucial to maintaining high quality outcomes for trainees. This paper reflects on principles that were developed through a programme where 20 primary teacher trainees, 8 school based mentors and 2 university tutors worked to develop the understanding of the pedagogy of teaching languages as they were being introduced into the primary curriculum. Although, specifically related to primary teacher training these principles have generic resonance across the teacher training sector regardless of phase or model of partnership. This is particularly the case now that the coalition government in England has produced its White Paper (Great Britain.

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Department for Education, 2010) outlining an even stronger role for schools and HEIs working in partnership:

‘Our strongest schools will take the lead and trainees will be able to develop their skills, learning from our best teachers. Increased opportunities for school-based training will suit career changers, new graduates and existing members of the school workforce wanting to learn on the job and receive a salary as they train’ (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2010 p.23).

The programme of language upskilling and mentor development specific to this research looked to developing the partnership relationship further by providing continuing professional development for mentors as well as upskilling trainees through collaborative working in the field of primary languages. In this paper the term primary languages is used to describe the teaching of languages other than English in primary schools.

Previous Research – a literature review

In delivering primary languages lessons, visiting teachers are often employed by the local authority (LA) to teach languages across a cluster of primary schools on a regular basis. One model observed for this research is where a specialist language teacher employed by the LA works in a number of schools to establish the language teaching and gradually withdraws support whilst moving onto another set of schools. Other versions of this model exist where visiting teachers are independent of the LA and privately employed by individual schools on a contract to teach languages on a regular basis. Martin (2008) agrees with Satchwell (2006) and Sharpe (2001) in her discussion of the gaps and potential problems in a system where ‘visiting teachers’ are used to teach languages. Martin (2008) continues to state that these gaps may be alleviated by a model where mentors and trainee teachers in school work together to get at what is best for the children.

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Rowe and Campbell (2005) conducted a research investigation which looked at bringing together trainees' subject knowledge and language teaching techniques with their school-based tutors' expertise in primary pedagogy. Rowe and Campbell's project was undertaken between 2003 and 2005 for the Teacher Training Authority (TTA) and makes several recommendations including developing a core of school-based tutors who have both sufficient subject and pedagogical knowledge of such specialist subjects as primary languages. Rowe and Campbell (2005) also recommend that CPD courses should receive funding in order to expand the number of such tutors. Macrory and McLachlan (2009) add that often trainee teachers are bringing their own expertise into schools where there may be sparse resources or low levels of confidence and competence in teaching languages. They continue to suggest that time is needed to build up such expertise, competence and knowledge and understanding. However, there is also the opportunity to develop the relationship or partnership that exists where schools are involved in the training of new teachers. This suggests that there needs to be an exploitation of the 'ways in which to work collaboratively with schools and trainees, by creating school-based activities that give the trainee and the teacher/mentor opportunities to teach, evaluate and discuss in a collaborative manner' (Macrory and McLachlan, 2009, p.268).

One of the key aims of the programme discussed in this paper is to look precisely at how the partnership could be further developed in ways previously outlined by Rowe and Campbell and Macrory and McLachlan. The aim is to take this research further and disseminate the key principles and quality of learning for wider practice across the teacher training sector. The opportunity for running such a programme came with the availability of funding for innovative projects for developing primary languages from the TDA.

Opportunity of TDA funding

Towards the end of the academic year 2007-08 the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) invited the University featured in this paper to tender for a

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bid to fund innovative programmes around primary languages. This University subsequently submitted a bid in order to deliver a programme of language upskilling and pedagogical enhancement with regard to primary languages to generalist trainees on the undergraduate route into teaching. The trainees volunteered for the language upskilling sessions following a call from university tutors. The sessions ran weekly for eight weeks and were extraneous to their normal taught timetable. The content of the sessions was based upon the trainees' prior experience and/or competence in either French or Spanish. These languages were chosen to reflect the expertise of the tutors delivering the sessions.

We designed the programme to involve primary partnership mentors and university tutors in supporting trainees on attachment in school. This specific design stemmed from our belief in continuing to build upon strong partnership. In practice this involved inviting mentors from the existing partnership schools to observe the trainees teaching primary language lessons on their final attachment. As mentors volunteered for this, it meant that the trainees were not always in the same schools as the mentors. However, funding for the programme allowed us to pay for the travel and supply costs incurred by the mentors and their schools as a result of them travelling to schools other than their own.

The aim of the original bid was to engage the trainees, tutors and primary mentors in collaborative primary languages activities. Therefore, running concurrently with the trainees' sessions were workshops where mentors and tutors were engaged in developing the skills required to observe and give constructive feedback on primary language lessons. During these two workshops, the mentors and university tutors worked together to establish a set of key principles for good practice in teaching primary language lessons. The key principles included good pronunciation and modeling of the language and the use of games and songs to foster enjoyment in the children. A final session involved the trainees and mentors meeting at the university for a whole group session on primary languages and the models of delivery offered by the different schools. The trainees were able to share key aspects of the

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University taught sessions with experienced teachers and meet with mentors who would subsequently observe them teaching their primary language lessons. Again funding for the programme allowed us to pay for schools release mentors to attend these sessions over three half days.

We believe the outcomes of this programme demonstrate novel ways of working in which mentors, trainees and teacher trainers enrich learning for all and how the notion of partnership can be re-framed particularly in the light of developments in the future of Initial Teacher Education (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2010).

Aims of the research

There were two questions that this paper was concerned with:

- What was the impact of this specific programme in building partnerships where trainees, tutors and mentors work collaboratively?
- What are the implications of this for future working in teacher education?

Methodology

This research lies principally in the interpretive paradigm in as much as it uses qualitative data collection instruments (Cohen et al.2007). We are interested in teasing out opinions and feelings of participants. So the data collection instruments are concerned with the language of responses and multiple realities rather than one reality demonstrated through objectivity and facts that quantitative data may provide. The nature of interpretive research is steeped in responses of participants and we have made the decision to investigate opinions and feelings after reading literature around the subject of primary languages. Previous research (Powell *et al.*, 2000; Martin, 2000 and Driscoll and Frost, 2004) refer to teachers' lack of confidence in their abilities to teach primary languages to an acceptable level. The opinions teachers held, as reported in these earlier studies about inadequate competencies means that teachers are shown to be insecure about teaching primary languages beyond the basics and have reservations about their subject knowledge. Previous research suggests that this study, and the research questions it seeks to explore, are

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concerned with people's feelings and opinions about the re-introduction of primary languages into the curriculum.

In response to the questions that this paper is concerned with, it is important to define and be specific about what we mean by partnership with regard to this particular programme before linking this in a broader sense to the ever evolving work of schools and HEIs in the training of new teachers. Partnership as reflected upon here is not meant in the broader sense of partnership that might be defined by University documentation. This programme was quite different in that it is asking mentors to meet with and observe trainees who were not in the same school as them. Mentors were also looking at a specific subject area and focusing more on agreed QTS standards around the teaching of primary languages rather than the more generic teaching practice that they would normally comment upon such as classroom organisation and behaviour management. In considering the data and reflecting upon the first research question we are interested in the aspects of partnership between teachers and mentors who work in schools and provide support for trainees on attachment. It is the relationships between the University, the trainees and the teachers that are important here and so we are also interested in the opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) for the trainees, university tutors and teachers. In terms of the second question, using new initiatives such as primary languages could be the vehicle for developing and enhancing the existing relationships offered through partnership and developing new ways of working.

Research design and data collection

We carried out two focus group interviews. The first of these was with a representative group of eight trainees who attended the upskilling sessions and the second with a representative group of six mentors involved in observing the trainees teaching primary languages on their final attachments in school. The interviews were conducted in this way in order to gain corroborative data from more than one source. We chose to use focus group interviews so that we could instigate discussion on the

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topic of primary languages, how they were taught in schools and participants' experiences of primary languages so far. Using a focus group allowed us to gauge the feelings of participants as they discussed and interacted together and gave their viewpoints as they emerged. We wanted the data to come from the groups' interactions with each other without our opinions predominating (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). We also wanted to synthesise and contrast these collective viewpoints.

Following the focus group interviews we formulated questionnaires for mentors and trainees. The individual questionnaires were grounded in the focus group interviews and allowed for further exploration of themes. In terms of true quantitative data the sample size was small, however, closed questions in the questionnaire provided data that was added to from other data collected. So although the data were mainly qualitative and concerned with language there was an element of numerical data in addition to this. We also wanted to corroborate responses to questionnaire items with interview responses although, on reflection, we felt that the use of questionnaires in this research was a weakness of the research design. This was due to the timing of the administration of the questionnaires which was in contention with the trainees' final attachment. Only ten questionnaires from trainees and two from mentors were returned. Due to these poor returns and the subsequent limited quantitative data that these generated compared with the valuable qualitative data gathered from the interviews, it was difficult to formulate trends in responses when analysing.

The third and final data collection instrument used was semi-structured interviews. As previously stated, we wanted to gather data in a particular order in order to achieve corroboration. Using the questionnaire schedules and responses from the focus group interviews we structured the interview questions around the research questions. By triangulating the data collection methodology around the research questions we were able to address each question through a combination of any two of the three methods used. The use of triangulation, through the piloting of questionnaires and interview questions, aided the eradication of bias. In terms of

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validity, it was important that in designing the focus group interview schedules, questionnaires and individual interview schedules, that they remained close to the research questions. This ensured that they measured or described what they were supposed to measure or describe (Bell, 1999).

Ethics

In order to be certain that we were carrying out the research in an ethical manner we needed to ensure that all participants were comfortable with being interviewed and receiving questionnaires to fill in. We considered some of the ethical issues that might arise and measures to counter these such as seeking approval from trainees and mentors before issuing questionnaires and conducting group and individual interviews. We assured all participants of their anonymity and successfully gained ethical approval from the university.

Findings and discussion

What was the impact of this specific programme in building partnerships where trainees, tutors and mentors work collaboratively?

The joint session with mentors and trainees working together prior to the attachment was received very positively. Teachers commented that this helps to raise the profile of primary languages for them and how trainees are being prepared to enter the workforce and teach them. The teachers also remarked upon how they enjoyed visiting schools other than their own when going to observe trainees teach a primary language.

A negative aspect of this arrangement where teachers visited other schools to observe trainees is in the logistics. For example, a number of the trainees found that once they were in their attachment schools, they were teaching in Early Years or in a school where they did not have the opportunity to teach primary languages as it was not at that time part of the curriculum. This meant that mentors were assigned new trainees where possible, or where mentors only saw one trainee. One of the trainees also commented on the communication difficulties with mentors who were

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not in the same school. However, where this worked well, teachers commented upon the confidence of the trainees and how this gave them as teachers the confidence to 'have a go' at teaching primary languages themselves.

Further advantages were that trainees felt that by focusing on one subject area, they could get subject-specific, detailed feedback in addition to the feedback they received from their attachment observations by their school mentor. One trainee remarked how his primary language observation feedback had enabled him to see the links between subjects and how this had led to him strengthening his abilities as a reflective practitioner. This trainee also remarked upon how he had benefitted from the subject knowledge of his peers as, although his preferred language is German, he picked up some subject knowledge of Spanish as a result of working with other trainees in the joint sessions. This was reciprocated by trainees who focused upon Spanish through the university taught sessions but who were taught some German by other trainees as they shared resources.

In terms of the mentors' own professional development in primary languages, they were in agreement that this had been quite different to their normal role as mentor observing a trainee in their own school and seeing the whole trainee develop over a period of time. Two of the teachers in the focus group agreed that observing a trainee who was unfamiliar to them had helped them to focus more specifically on the skills of teaching a primary language lesson and that this in turn had extended their own understanding of related pedagogy. This concurred with others who commented upon the reciprocal nature of the observations. They felt that they were learning from each other and that working with the trainees on the joint session had helped to up skill them as teachers too. **The impact of this has since been disseminated further. Teachers involved in the project have taken the skills of observing a specific subject area back into their schools to deliver professional development. The teachers have delivered staff meetings to colleagues back in school on giving subject specific feedback. They have commented on how this has been received very positively. One such teacher commented: 'Some colleagues**

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commented on how actually we always focus on classroom management ... focusing on subject specific feedback has brought us back to thinking about how trainees can be involved in enhancing our subject knowledge too'.

The findings of this paper reflect those of Rowe and Campbell (2005) who looked at bringing together trainees' subject knowledge and language teaching techniques with school-based tutors' expertise in primary pedagogy and classroom experience. This is supported by Macrory and McLachlan (2009) who point to the fact that often trainee teachers are bringing expertise into the school thus enhancing their wider school effectiveness – an aspect of partnership we are interested in and which has universal interest to all involved in ITE. Conversely, where there are increasing numbers of schools becoming more proficient in good practice in primary language teaching, then there are more schools from which trainees can learn. Macrory and McLachlan (2009, p.268) argue that it is important that ITE providers are enabled to identify and support this expertise so that they and the trainees can support in turn and refer to 'a golden opportunity for trainee teachers and experienced teachers to work together'. They add that this could help with embedding languages as well as encouraging a more thematic or cross-curricular approach to teaching them. This also has resonance across the primary curriculum as increasing numbers of schools seek to deliver the current National Curriculum in either a more creative or thematic way. The unique delivery approach to professional development has been a key area of impact to have emerged from this project. This can be built upon to ensure that common goals and outcomes for teachers, trainees and ITE providers remain focused and relevant to the partnership and in raising standards across the sector.

What are the implications of this for future working in teacher education?

Two of the trainees remarked on how the programme gave the teachers a chance to see current research into primary languages and how trainee teachers are working to enhance current practice: *'They can see what we are doing at university and share [this] in their different schools'.* A further example of this is where one of the trainees on the Early Years route into teaching was initially concerned that the

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programme would be more primary based rather than relevant to an Early Years' setting. However, during the joint session with mentors she met an Early Years specialist teacher who enabled her to see *'that it can happen and has happened, so that was good to talk to her'*. This insight into what trainees bring to curriculum development concurs with the comments of a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), and a former trainee from the university, we interviewed. The NQT is regarded as being at the 'forefront' of developments in primary languages and was asked to lead its introduction with experienced staff, in her first year of teaching. These outcomes from this project highlight how working in this way has implications for new ways of regarding CPD not only for trainees and experienced teachers but also for those at the beginning of their careers.

This impact is strengthened further by one teacher who remarked in the individual interview that *'it is a good idea for trainees to see the impact of being involved in a programme like this on their own professional development'*. She continued that *'trainees are enabled through this programme to gain a skill that headteachers want to see and so having these 'extras' on their curriculum vitae makes the trainee an attractive prospect in terms of employment'*. This was echoed by another teacher in an individual interview: *'You foster enjoyment in a whole new breed of teachers; we need teachers like this entering the profession to teach languages'*. Trainees also saw working alongside mentors on the programme as having a positive impact upon their development. They saw using the teachers' experience in the classroom and in primary pedagogy as very useful in informing the development of primary languages. This is especially effective when put into practice alongside the trainees' upskilling in the subject as in this programme. It also gives trainees the chance to see current practice, however diverse this might be, in primary languages. By using primary languages as a vehicle to work in this way it is clear that both experienced teachers and trainees alike can see how fruitful this is in terms of mutual CPD. As HEIs look to working alongside teaching schools and maintaining strong employability skills in their trainees, innovative ways of working are vital in terms of the future development of partnership across the teacher training sector.

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The reciprocal relationship between the university, trainees, schools and teachers was referred to numerous times both in the focus group interviews and individual interviews with teachers. This echoes Rowe and Campbell's (2005) investigation into effective school based training of primary modern foreign language trainees on a PGCE route. Rowe and Campbell (2005) refer to the success of such a project as based upon the quality of training, school placements and mentor support and training. This particular outcome is of great interest to us as researchers and will be something valuable to explore in the light of changes suggested by the coalition Government's White Paper (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2010). This relationship will be paramount as teaching schools are established; 'a new national network of Teaching Schools, on the model of teaching hospitals, giving outstanding schools the role of leading the training and professional development of teachers and head teachers'. (Great Britain. Department for Education, 2010) p.20).

Although the model of working outlined in this paper happened before the present government came into office, the innovative way of developing partnership already looks towards government proposals. What is of particular interest is how working in this way with trainees in schools in an equal and reciprocal relationship on a specific feature of the primary curriculum has enabled partnership to be taken further. Building upon existing good relationships and practice to take the learning of trainees, teachers and children forward emerges as a clear outcome and a real strength of the project. Of the ten trainee questionnaires returned, eight say that the programme has built upon existing partnership with schools to at least a great extent. This view is corroborated by positive comments throughout the interviews with teachers and trainees.

Conclusion

In concluding the findings of this research, we consider where our research might lead to next and the impact upon practice. It is by drawing upon the findings of research such as this that we have already started to focus upon how we as teacher trainers might move forwards through the development of specific models of

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partnership in order to continue to deliver high quality teacher training and meet the objectives we are facing in the developing climate.

One area for consideration is the development of a core of lead mentors for specific areas such as teaching and learning, assessment for learning and indeed 'new' areas of the curriculum such as primary languages. These mentors should have the subject and pedagogical knowledge to mentor trainees. However, developing an 'inner partnership' where mentors develop their own interest and expertise in a specific area is a viable aim.

Another vital development must be that HEIs continue to work with trainees as they enter their NQT years. A number of the trainees who engaged upon this programme are working in the local area as NQTs and want to further their development in primary languages by being involved in future projects with the University. The University has also recently had a particular focus of further enhancing links with its alumni through the development of societies, newsletters and an alumni association. More specifically the school in which this research is based has worked closely with trainees who submitted high quality research projects in their final year. This has led to the development and dissemination of that research at school-wide research conferences. This in turn has enhanced the engagement of the alumni as researchers following their undergraduate studies. Working with past students on new initiatives and research areas in this way continues the model of working demonstrated in this paper and contributes to the continuing drive to build strong partnerships for success.

Advocated throughout this paper is the expansion of working through partnership using new initiatives as the vehicle. This is where teachers, trainees, local authority advisors, ITE providers and other relevant parties work together on completely new initiatives or those where there has previously been limited success – as with primary languages. This building upon and expanding of partnership is an efficient and effective way of working where there is no one expert but where expertise from

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all sources is drawn upon with one common goal. In the case of this programme, the goal was to successfully implement primary languages and develop confidence in this area at its re-introduction to the primary curriculum. Whilst we are a long way off this goal, setting up this way of working through wider partnership has paved the way and provided a robust foundation for this to develop further. The generic nature of this way of working is transferable and applicable to all sectors of the teacher training sector as we look towards the future of teacher training and the forms it may take.

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